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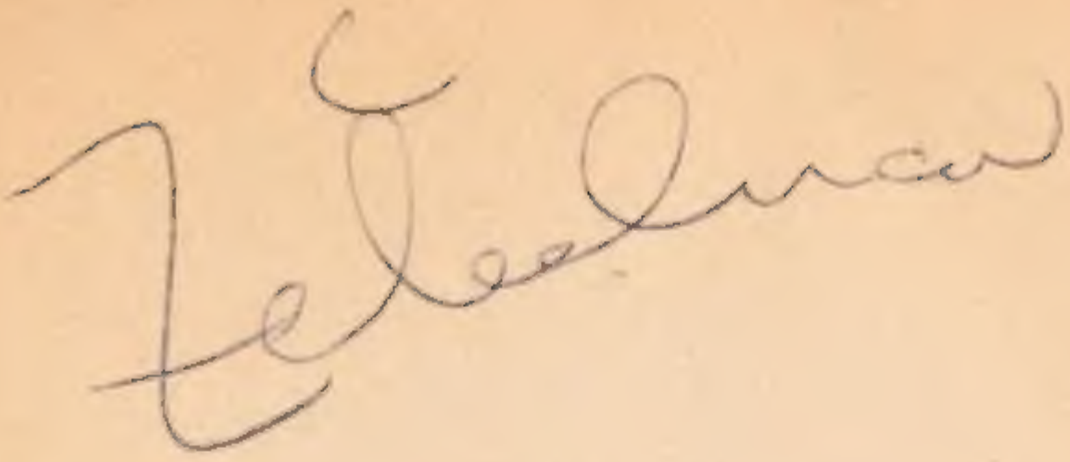
Was the man she married her protector—or her tormentor?

The Cruel Legacy

LAURA HOPE HUDSON



INSANITY

There was no way of excluding it from her consciousness now that she was back at Foxhollow and the years had brought her closer to her terrible destiny. It was at age thirty that the Navard women succumbed. Only three years remained—little time in which to live, unless, of course, she was one of the fortunate few who avoided the madness. It was possible, she assured herself. It was simply a matter of being careful, of taking care of herself. Yes, that was what she had to do, and everything would be all right.

But she didn't really believe it. Not for a minute.

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LAURA HOPE HUDSON

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THE CRUEL LEGACY

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chapter ONE

Back to Foxhollow!

It was a thought almost unbearably sweet, the anticipation almost too much to entertain, overwhelming in its ramifications. Memories of the years spent there flooded Emilie Navard's brain in a mixture of delight and regret, of hope and fear, a misty assemblage of emotion. She tried to isolate her thoughts and find the pattern of her life that now directed her back to the place where she had been born and grown up so happily, and had finally left in despair and confusion. It was a hopeless effort. Fate had interrupted her self-imposed exile and was returning her to an existence which now drifted to mind in disconnected bits and pieces that refused to lock into any meaningful design—fragments of the past that gave no hint of the future.

Back to Foxhollow!

It should have been enough, she told herself nervously, as the train rushed south through the night toward St. Agathe. She should have felt only joy and contentment but instead her emotions were a turbulent jumble that precluded any rest. *Foxhollow.* The name echoed in counterpoint to the clicking train wheels as she peered through the window at the dark beyond. Her reflection stared back at her, intent, serious, the troubled eyes of a twenty-seven-year-old woman on an uncertain journey. There was a delicacy about her features. The nose

was perfectly formed, cheeks downy and soft, the chin rounded, the mouth neat, yet full and slightly tremulous. Though her smile came quickly, there was a sad cast to it. The whole appearance was wistful. Her luminous, innocent eyes were defensive, reflecting the uncertainty she had always felt and felt now.

Emilie stared guiltily at the image of herself in the glass and was dismayed to find herself a plain woman, ordinary in every way. A high-necked white blouse and a long, drab gray skirt added to the picture and she wore not even a single piece of jewelry to brighten the costume. Yet anyone else looking at her would have appraised her in a more flattering manner, for she was more than ordinarily pretty and the plainness she saw existed only in her cloudy vision of herself.

She turned away, wishing she were truly beautiful, as befitted the new mistress of Foxhollow, as Mavis had been. Her tapered fingers fluttered lightly across her pale throat, as if it were indeed graced by a diamond necklace, some family heirloom. It occurred to her that she was being remiss not to dress more fashionably in order to make more of whatever gifts life had bestowed upon her. After all, it was *her* duty now that Mavis was dead and Foxhollow was hers alone. People would expect her to be elegant and charming, worthy of her legacy. Doubt came flooding over her and she silently remonstrated herself for even thinking she could ever compete with the beautiful Mavis, no matter what she did or how she dressed. She would be her own mistress at Foxhollow, shape her own destiny, run her own life.

Back to Foxhollow!

Like a vaguely remembered melody, a vision of the old manor house floated to mind, and she saw it as it had been when she was a child, an immutable white monument to her heritage and to her future. Girdled by a broad veranda on which the Navard men had traditionally taken their liquid pleasure, Foxhollow stood square and solid atop a gentle rise within sight of the slow-moving Mississippi. Watching the sun set beyond

the river was a daily ritual at Foxhollow, a golden vision never forgotten once it had been enjoyed.

There was a timelessness about Foxhollow, as if it were a bridge between the glorious past and the uncertain future, an island of dependability in the shifting sands of time, always present, always safe. Growing up there, flitting like a wild creature through the woods, swimming in Old Big Strong (as the Negroes called the river), watching the birds and the animals back in the bayous and playing with the children of the sharecroppers, lent a sense of permanence, almost of immortality, to Emilie's life. This was where she belonged and would always remain, *her* place. She naïvely believed that this easily paced and tranquil life, filled with love and understanding and kindness, would continue forever. But she soon learned that life *is* change and nothing stays the same. Nothing.

All during the long and tiring journey from New York City, Emilie kept entertaining memories of the life at Foxhollow when she was growing up. Happiness had been a seemingly permanent condition, the sweet air scented with wisteria and alive with laughter, the joy constant and replenished each day.

A vital part of that happiness had been her mother, slender and patrician, with long golden hair brushed back off a fine forehead in a succession of natural waves, cascading over delicate shoulders to a tiny waist. She was a beautiful creature who harked back to the Old South, the South of compassion and culture, of manners and propriety, of chivalry. She drifted through the slow days like a wisp of cloud, splendid to see, enhancing the landscape, but amorphous and fragile, leaving no firm evidence of her visit.

One day her mother began to change. She cared less for her appearance and the once peaceful eyes grew nervous and never still; the soft mouth became hard and slashing in its condemnation of everything and everyone. There were fits of temper, of screeching, of violence, and long days and nights when she was confined to her

room, immobilized in her bed, under the constant care of a physician. Her wild ravings echoed like the cry of the devil through the big house.

"She is sick," Pierre Navard explained to the young and frightened Emilie. "It is a sickness of the mind and the soul, and in time your mother will be herself again and all will be as it was."

He was wrong. The madness—and it was madness—never withdrew for very long. Emilie remembered those moments when she would see her mother supine under the lace canopy, pale and thin, a remote sadness in those moist eyes and a wistful smile on bloodless lips, too weak to speak. Inevitably the transformation would take place and the delicate face would become grotesque, distorted into a mask of hate and anger, the fine neck ridged with muscle and nerves, the twisted mouth uttering hateful oaths and vows of disaster, and Emilie would be hustled from the room. But what she had seen stayed with her, was with her now, and in time she learned the truth of her mother's illness.

Emilie was not quite ten years old when her mother died. There was a sense of relief in the house when it happened—relief that suffering had ended—for she had been out of her senses all the time during those final weeks and had brought only pain to herself and torment to those she loved. At last the shrieking was over, the unmentionable thoughts no longer verbalized, the screaming accusations silenced forever. Peace returned to Foxhollow.

The years that followed were good ones. Emilie especially loved those long, full evenings with her father, playing chess, or reading to him, or playing the piano for him. They were good times, with intrusions from the outside world few and far between. Occasionally, Pierre Navard would leave the plantation in response to the call of his business interests and would travel to New Orleans, Memphis, or Atlanta. But his absences were short and they changed nothing, until the time he stayed away for three months. These were three endless, empty

months for Emilie, and when he returned nothing was ever to be the same again.

She was sixteen when Pierre Navard brought his new wife back to Foxhollow. Mavis was her name. She was tall and imposing, with ebony hair and cold green eyes, her features arranged in disdainful perfection. She dressed in the height of fashion. Her coming was a shock wave that broke over Emilie with shattering impact, sundering all the myths of her existence. Pierre's remarriage was, to her betrayal of her mother. She sought out dark and quiet places where she could cry out her unhappiness unobserved. If she managed to conceal her feelings from her father, Emilie was totally unsuccessful where Mavis was concerned. She was too clever a woman, too sophisticated and too perceptive, to be fooled.

"We should be friends," Mavis told Emilie one afternoon at tea, her gaze level and icily steady. "I intend to spend the rest of my life at Foxhollow and I *will* be mistress here. It would be to your advantage to declare a truce."

Emilie found it difficult to sort out her thoughts, to meet Mavis' eyes. "You are my father's wife," she managed. "That entitles you to the obedience of everyone at Foxhollow. You shall have mine." She then ran out of the house and into the deep woods, where she flung herself onto the grassy softness beneath a huge oak and cried bitterly.

Mavis' authoritarian manner soon organized Foxhollow to her desire, brooking no hesitation to her commands. The servants and sharecroppers often felt the sting of her tongue. Once, she flew into a rage at Billy Joe Johnson, the proud and silent butler who had served at Foxhollow for forty years and whose parents, as slaves, had also served, insisting that he alter his traditional way of doing things. And on another occasion, Emilie saw Mavis strike one of the young serving girls who sometimes helped out around the house.

One night Emilie was awakened by Mavis' voice, penetrating and insistent, shrilling wild imprecations at

gentle Pierre Navard, a man who knew little of the world apart from his books and his music. She was excoriating him for not trying to elevate Foxhollow to its past glory, to the former lofty social and economic status and the material rewards that had tempted Mavis to come to Foxhollow. Emilie made a mighty effort to understand how her father had allowed himself to be tricked into marrying such a woman. She tried to discover what mysterious fascination Mavis possessed for him, but it was beyond her girlish innocence.

One fact was clear to Emilie: Mavis loathed her. She made that evident in every malevolent stare, in every thin-voiced criticism, in every disparaging remark. It was many years before Emilie could understand that Mavis hated her not because of anything she herself had done, but simply because she existed as a living threat to Mavis by being a Navard by birth and heredity.

With Mavis' coming, Emilie felt like a stranger in her own home, almost an intruder, an outsider. Mavis ruled with an iron will and a caustic voice, dominating Pierre completely. The servants and sharecroppers who did not leave were too intimidated to stand against her.

So it was that Emilie drifted into a world of her own making, a world of dreams and of nature. She sought out special places all over the sprawling land that was Foxhollow, secret places where she was able to savor the unspoiled beauty of the creatures who also made Foxhollow their home. She would perch on the high bank of the Mississippi and watch the river gulls wheel about seeking a meal and, finding their prey, dive into the waters below. And always there was the thick green dampness of the woods that made her giddy and lightheaded as she tramped about the countryside, listening to the sounds of the insects and the birds and the other creatures of the forest—*her* forest.

One afternoon she returned to the house to be greeted by Mavis' peevish voice sounding from behind the closed door of Pierre's study. There was no mistaking the anger and frustration in her tone.

"What good is the land?" she cried out, as if for the tenth time. "Nothing of worth grows on it any longer. It brings in little money. Let me sell it. It's good for nothing else."

Emilie strained to catch her father's reply. It was the only time she ever knew him to oppose Mavis on any matter. "This place belongs to my family and has for two hundred years. When you and I are gone it will belong to Emilie and she in turn will pass it on to her children. Foxhollow is not for sale and never will be, so long as I live."

Emilie shielded her ears against the invective that broke out of Mavis then. Her voice rose and fell like a butcher's cleaver and there was no silencing her. Emilie ran to her room and threw herself across the bed, sobbing piteously, for at that moment she realized it was only a matter of time until she would be forced to leave Foxhollow.

She never dreamed how close that day was. It came with morbid swiftness, beginning at breakfast one gray morning when Pierre sought to smother a burst of coughing behind his napkin. His eyes teared and his face flushed and grew mottled. Emilie hurried to his side with a goblet of water. He drank, then, gasping, leaned back in the high carved chair that had been brought from Paris over a century before. A ghost of a smile turned his aristocratic mouth, then lit his sad eyes.

"There. That is past." He perceived the alarm in Emilie's eyes. "Do not concern yourself, *ma petite*, we Navards are a hardy lot and it was only a simple cough."

"Let me send for Doctor McCallum, Papa."

He waved a hand at her and for the first time she became aware of how slender he was, how pale and delicate. "Nonsense. I shall be fine."

"Finish your breakfast," Mavis said calmly from her place at the far end of the long mahogany table. "Your father is all right." Emilie looked at Mavis, so chic in a dressing gown of brocated green silk, imported from a Paris couturier, hair piled high upon her well-formed

head, manner aloof and remote. At that moment Emilie hated her for not displaying more compassion for Pierre. A glimmer of something strange and chilling appeared in Mavis' dry eyes. "You dramatize matters so, Emilie," she intoned. "Is that also a tradition of the Navard women?"

Emilie fought to close her mind to the implication of those words and returned to her place. She had heard the gossiping of the servants after her mother's death, remembered well the whispers of family curses, of madness inherited. . . .

Pierre forced himself to sit erect. "Mavis," he said sternly, smothering a cough. "There is no need to refer to such affairs. Not now or ever."

Mavis laughed at that, but there was no humor in the brittle sound. "Emilie should know what the future holds in store. She was witness to her mother falling victim to the curse and surely she knows of her ancestors' fate—her grandmother, and *her* mother, and . . ."

"Enough," Pierre said weakly.

Mavis went on. "How does it go? The Navard Curse strikes most often before the age of thirty. The evidence becomes clear. The forgetfulness, the hallucinations, the devil's own nightmares." Mavis glanced mockingly at Emilie, and laughed cruelly. "How old are you now, dear sweet Emilie? Twenty-two, if I reckon right. That leaves little time before the madness takes you."

Her laughter was a rising, triumphant bleat that announced the pleasure she found in misfortune, and it echoed in Emilie's brain for a long time afterward. Never again was she able to exclude the memory of the Navard Curse entirely from her consciousness.

"We will never again speak of this," Pierre said, struggling to his feet. "Never again." He started to cough once more and held a napkin to his mouth. He excused himself and withdrew to his bedchamber. He never left it. Three days later he was dead of pneumonia. Emilie never ceased blaming Mavis' driving social aspirations and her vile temper for Pierre's death. How ironic, Emilie would one day reflect, that Mavis, who had

brought a vital spark into Pierre Navard's otherwise dull life, fanned that flame into a voracious blaze that scorched all life out of him. Emilie could never forgive Mavis for that. Even on the day of Pierre's funeral, Mavis never relented, even denouncing Emilie's tears.

"Enough of your misplaced sentimentality," she rasped. "Your dear father was a weakling, with a minimum of life in his veins. He was cursed by the weakness of the Navard men even as you are cursed by the madness of the family's women. . . ."

Three days later Emilie left Foxhollow, certain that life there with Mavis would be intolerable. Now, five lonely years later, she was returning from her self-imposed exile. Lawyer William Markham's letter had said only that Mavis had died in an accident and that Foxhollow now belonged to Emilie. He urged her to return home immediately and take up residence. She had needed no further coaxing and quickly made the necessary arrangements.

Yet as the train brought her closer and closer to her ancestral home, a pervading sense of doom took hold of her and spread throughout her being. Soon she would resume her rightful place as a Navard. This realization caused a single, awful question to be born in her brain. Would the unhappy tradition of Foxhollow's women claim her, too? Would she soon succumb to the Curse, even as her mother had?

Was Emilie to be the last of her line?

chapter TWO

Emilie was grateful when at last the train journey was terminated. The trip had been a trying experience, the ride unsteady at best, the straight-backed chairs in constant conflict with the joints and curves of the human form. It was with a sense of relief, and trepidation, that she debarked at Manchac, the nearest station to St. Agathe. She contemplated remaining there overnight in some suitable rooming house and setting out for Foxhollow in the morning. But her yearning to set foot once again on that familiar ground drove her on, and sufficient hours of daylight remained in which to make the trip.

It was a simple matter to engage a carriage and driver at a stable not far from the depot, and soon she was bouncing along on the old dirt road that wound west to St. Agathe, and Foxhollow. The driver was a gentleman in his middle years not given to idle conversation, and so she was able to drift into the mist of memory as they travelled, perceiving familiar landmarks, recalling other such trips with her father at the reins. A sense of sadness came over her, but she refused to give herself to it; she was going home and this was a joyous time.

A mile south of St. Agathe the road forked, one branch heading toward the sleepy village itself, the other turning left toward the river and Foxhollow. She ordered the driver to proceed left. Minutes later they were in the

midst of the thick, almost tropical, woods. The ground glistened with moisture from the bayous, those lazy streams that preserve the balance of water on the Delta. Here the air was thick with the damp scent of greenery and the sounds of the wild things that lived in the bush. There was a swift movement off to the right, a fox perhaps, or a rabbit, or one of the ginger-colored raccoons. A covey of quail waddled into sight, then disappeared into a thicket. She spied a green snake coiled around a palmetto stem looking for all the world like fine porcelain, and an opposum, trundled into a patch of sunlight, gazed around and scurried for cover. Out of sight, away from the road, she knew there would be other creatures, the beautiful blue herons, the predatory alligators and flocks of water birds nesting peacefully.

Without warning, the road broke out of the high green walls and the carriage rattled across an unsteady wooden bridge spanning Drew Creek, then turned to the right. Her heart pounded crazily beneath her breast at the sight that lay ahead.

Foxhollow.

"Stop, please!" she cried. A flood of memory warmed her at that first view and had she not been seated, her weakened knees would surely not have supported her. Her eyes, moist and blinking, tracked over the gently rolling, green carpet that sloped gradually to the low hillock where stood Foxhollow, the great house itself. Breathing was difficult as her eyes devoured the great square structure, solid against the darkening sky, its Georgian pillars seeming to reach deep into the earth itself for sustenance and strength. There was an air of permanence to the house, as if it had always stood here, and always would, an immutable monument to Navards long dead and those not yet born.

She sat staring at the happy scene for a long while until she became aware of the driver's restiveness. She told him to drive on and they moved closer, between twin rows of stately oaks that studded the roadside which were planted nearly two centuries earlier by one

of Emilie's ancestors. The oaks were a living link with another era. At last she was home and she vowed silently never again to leave this place. Her exile was ended and she was back to stay. Forever. Here she would live out her time and here she would die.

The driver placed her luggage on the veranda and she paid him lavishly, more than she could rightly afford. But she wanted to share her happiness, to give pleasure to another person. She refused his offer to carry her things into the house, preferring with sentimental perversity to set foot inside alone and unaided. She watched him rattle down the road, urging his horse to greater speed, anxious to return to Manchac. She waited until he disappeared before turning her attention to the house. She had decided to spend her first night here, visiting Lawyer Markham in the morning. It was then that she received the first of what would, in time, prove to be many surprises. All the windows of the house were shuttered, and the door locked. She tried them all without success. Foxhollow was sealed against any entry.

This disturbed her deeply, for it was a Navard tradition that the house was never locked, the doors always open to a passing stranger. Now everything seemed altered and a piercing chill filled the warm air. It was then that she began to notice other changes. There were potholes in the road and the Drew Creek bridge was in need of repairs. Some of the oaks showed signs of rot and blight. She turned again to the house, gazed at it with dismay in the fast-fading light. Signs of neglect were everywhere. Deep and jagged cracks criss-crossed the walls, and a good whitewashing was in order; the wide veranda was chipped and cracked, and the gravel walks were rutted and worn, their matched rock edgings displaying ugly gaps.

Sadness settled like a blanket over Emilie as she tried not to consider what life had been like during those years of her absence. Clearly, Mavis had cared nothing for the house, or the land, and she feared what further signs of neglect she would discover in time.

But even in that distressing moment there was beauty to be savored at Foxhollow and she hurried to the back veranda to see the sun as it dropped out of sight behind the river to the west, the drifting waters glinting purple and gold and orange. From afar, a crow cawed and another replied, and crickets chirped in the brush. Time became meaningless as she devoured the sight in reminiscent joy, thinking of how her father had loved this time of day.

Soon, the sun was gone. Darkness covered the land and she drew her lace shawl about her shoulders for protection, though scant, against the chilling night air. She shivered and told herself to find what pleasure was to be had in the cool spring night, for soon it would be summer and the heat would be endless and oppressive. She turned to leave when a sudden movement in the shadows of trees along the river bank caught her eye. She peered through the darkness. Someone was there, someone was moving slowly, and she called out, "Hello there. Who are you?"

There was no answer, and the intruder turned back into the woods and disappeared. A swift flash of fear knifed deep into her middle and her skin rippled darkly. The darkness had become mysterious and threatening, and the thought of her isolation brought on a mounting nervousness. Her mind raged wildly, seeking a way out of this predicament. It would take hours to walk into St. Agathe and the thought of making such a march at night was in no way appetizing. Then she remembered the old slave quarters at the river, no more than a quarter-mile upstream. There, she knew, familiar faces waited with warm voices, a friendly welcome, and the reassurance of the past. She picked her way down the slope toward the river, toward the narrow path that followed the bank. The time-worn trail was familiar even in the dark.

The slave quarters were modest huts constructed in the same simple manner as those built back in the early 1700's when slaves were first introduced into the territory, then a province of Imperial France. The slaves made

their primitive homes of split cypress boards plastered over with the red clay so abundant in the neighborhood, kneading in Spanish moss for binder. Thatched palmetto leaves served as roofing.

These huts were the homes of the Negro tenant farmers and their families, traditionally the tillers of the land at Foxhollow. Each morning those people went out to work their allotted sections of the land, a percentage of their harvest going to the master of Foxhollow, his tithe as landowner. It was a tradition on the Delta that to labor for a Navard had always been a good piece of fortune, for the sharecropping arrangements were fair and no Navard ever treated his people unkindly.

As she neared the quarters, Emilie thought of Mary Johnson, wife of Billy Joe, who had been a second mother, allowing her to clutter up the kitchen while she prepared meals, hugging the child to her ample bosom whenever comfort was required, blistering her bottom when such was in order—Mary, who always smelled of good things, Mary, warm and good-humored, and full of love and kindness. Emilie quickened her pace toward the hut belonging to the Johnsons. A yellow light flickered in the window and there was a shuffling inside when she knocked.

"Who you lookin' for?" The voice was different than Emilie had remembered, salted with the weariness of the years, though still vibrant with life.

"Mary!" she cried. "It's Emilie Navard."

The door was flung open, and silhouetted in the dancing light was Mary, her immense frame tented by a gray robe given her one Christmas by Pierre Navard. Her eyes widened and that great gleaming dark face broke open in a smile of welcome.

"My Lord, it is Emilie! Come home to us. Oh, child, it is so fine to set eyes on you again."

Her great arms spread in welcome and Emilie entered that loving circle and they cried over each other. All the vagrant feelings of the past returned, so that Emilie felt truly home and safe at last.

"Billy Joe!" Mary cried out. "Come and see who's come back to us, come back to Foxhollow, come to make things right again."

He stood a little less erect than she remembered, but there was still the same proud set to his fine head and he bowed stiffly from the waist, eyes glittering a welcome, as he spoke formally.

"Good to have you back home, Miss Emilie."

Billy Joe extended his hand and Emilie took it gravely. She knew him to be a proud and proper man, always aware of who he was and of his heritage. Billy Joe's ancestors had been at Foxhollow almost as long as the Navards. One of his forebears had fallen in the old wars against the Natchez Indians and another had helped develop a practical method of granulating sugar cane, thus providing the territory with a profitable industry when times were bad. Billy Joe belonged at Foxhollow.

Then Mary led her inside, insisting that she share their evening meal, a meager repast of potato broth and rabbit stew. Afterwards they settled around the brick fireplace and Emilie tried to answer Mary's questions about life in New York City.

"Sure glad you come home," Mary said. "Things now are goin' to be the way they used to be, with a true Navard come back to take care of us all."

What a frightening thought! To Emilie, coming home had meant reclaiming a familiar haven for herself, to secure herself against the demands of the world, shielding herself against its vagaries and harshness. She had not considered other people, the responsibilities of being mistrees of Foxhollow; she wasn't at all certain she was capable of fulfilling her obligations.

"Things were different with Miss Mavis around," Mary said. "Bad different."

Billy Joe scowled. "Jes different, is all. Ain't our place to say whut's good and whut's not so good."

Emilie tried to change the subject. "Have you been farming, Billy Joe?"

A deep chuckle issued from his throat. "Fussin' with it.

But this old man been a house servant for too many years."

Emilie listened intently. She knew that Mavis had disapproved of the old man around the house, and had turned him out soon after Pierre died. She smiled at him encouragingly. "Soon you'll be back in the big house, Billy Joe. Tomorrow I'm going to talk to Lawyer Markham and take possession of the place."

Mary laughed softly. "And then things be the way they should. Tonight, Miss Emilie, honey, you sleep in my bed. Come mornin', Billy Joe'll ride you into St. Agathe."

Emilie nodded, barely repressed a yawn. "Tell me, Billy Joe, why is the house locked and shuttered? I've never known it to be before."

"Miss Mavis," Billy Joe said carefully. "She was a person for keepin' a place shet tight. Didn't want strangers comin' around. An' I figure Lawyer Markham ain't about to take no chances, nobody livin' in the big house, an' all."

"Things ain' the way they used to be," Mary said. "Folks say they see strange things . . ."

"I saw a man earlier," Emilie said. "Down near the river. I called to him but he went away. A vagabond, I imagine."

Billy Joe wore a solemn expression on his darkly rutted face. "If'n you say so, Miss Emilie."

A random thought came flitting into Emilie's mind. There had been a single question nagging at her ever since she had received William Markham's summons to return home.

"How," she asked, keeping her voice light, "did Miss Mavis die?"

Mary started to answer, but Billy Joe cut in. "Lawyer Markham, he know everythin'. There was a accident and Miss Mavis die. That's all folks know. Don' know the how of it, or the why of it. Whut happen in the big house that night nobody aroun' the slave quarter know. Nobody at all."

There was no mistaking the sound in Billy Joe's voice. It was fear, the fear of intruding into an area not safe for one of his station. Emilie wanted to assure him that there was nothing to be afraid of, only to discover that she lacked that confidence herself. So she said nothing, trying to quell her own trepidation, aware that more had changed during her absence than merely the surface condition of the house and the lands. Nothing was as it used to be.

Nothing could be, ever again.

chapter THREE

It was one of those late spring mornings that herald the coming heat. The sun was already blazing, the air was slow and heavy, birds drifted aimlessly, in preparation for the oppressive summer soon to come. A thin layer of moisture coated Emilie's skin as she stood outside the Johnson's hut and watched Billy Joe hitch his buggy up to a field horse.

What a tired-looking steed he was! Sway-back, spavined and forlorn, the gray beast stood patiently, resigned to his life of labor. The buggy was in no better condition than the horse, unsteady and in need of a painting, but possessed of four wheels and thus serviceable. Billy Joe helped her onto the slatted wooden seat, then went around the other side and climbed up beside her. She waved to Mary who stood in the doorway as they got under way, the gray moving at an uncertain trot.

An hour later the carriage clattered into St. Agathe. The tiny community seemed no different than it had been when Emilie had departed five years before. Her eyes drank in the familiar sights as they moved slowly along: the broad dirt street was lined on each side with narrow wood walks and single-story wood frame buildings painted white or yellow or a faded blue. Here and there she spied a new addition, a building more imposing

and constructed with a sense of permanence, with walls made of red brick.

Otherwise, life seemed to proceed at the same leisurely pace in St. Agathe. Only a few people were in the streets: ladies in their ankle-length dresses and flowered hats and parasols, come to town to shop and gossip, and men, farmers mostly, congregating in small groups outside the stable or in front of Henry Berger's general store, where Pierre Navard used to buy Emilie striped peppermint candy to suck on and where Mary Johnson had brought her to choose the material for her first party dress. Here and there, Emilie saw a familiar face and nodded politely and was nodded to in turn.

Now they rolled past the Delta Hotel, which was not really a hotel at all, but only a rooming house with a wide shaded porch where the men of the town came to sit and talk and rock. Emilie could see the church looming up ahead, and she felt a tinge of nostalgia for all the Sunday mornings over the years spent singing in the choir. A thickness filled her throat and she blinked to force back the tears.

"Heah we is," Billy Joe said, drawing the buggy to a halt. "Mr. William Markham's legal office."

Billy Joe helped Emilie down and she gazed up at the second floor of the shingled building where the lawyer conducted his business. There on the plate glass window she saw his name emblazoned in gold lettering.

"Will you wait for me, please, Billy Joe?"

He bowed in that formal manner of his. "Yes'm. I sure will wait. When you ready to head on back, I be here. Right here."

Emilie made herself climb the narrow staircase to William Markham's office with all deliberateness, composing herself before entering. She was aware that her future depended completely on what he had to tell her. She breathed deeply and realized that her heart was thumping irregularly in her chest. She wet her lips and made certain that the lace at her throat and wrists was in order,

and that no dust from the trip was soiling the Confederate gray dress she wore. Her knock was tentative and she repeated it.

"Come in."

William Markham had always been more than just a legal advisor to the Navard family, he was also an old and cherished friend. He was still a handsome man, though his once brown hair had gone white and curled thickly behind pink ears. His blue eyes retained a youthful sparkle and his face was intelligent and assured. As Emilie entered the office, he came out from behind his old roll-top desk, hands extended, a smile of greeting fanning across his generous mouth. Emilie felt a soft, warm glow of pleasure spread across her middle. She placed her hands in his and offered her cheek. He kissed her, then drew back, and gazed searchingly into her face, his expression solemn.

"You have become a lovely and charming woman, Emilie," he said at last. "Beautiful."

She blushed and lowered her eyes. Beautiful? Emilie Navard? Not in her wildest fantasies did she ever consider herself to be beautiful. Oh, there was a certain fragile prettiness to her face, she thought, a regularity and delicacy of feature, but high cheekbones falling away so swiftly to the jaw lent an almost triangular shape to her face, eliminating all hope of true beauty. Her mouth was good, pleasant and warm, full without petulance, and her eyes were large and clear, perhaps her best feature. If only they held still more frequently, instead of darting about so that she resembled nothing so much as a doe poised for flight. *How appropriate an image*, she thought sadly. Fear and uncertainty fluttered in her breast like a trapped butterfly.

She brought herself back to the present, offering some remark about how good it was to see an old friend again after so many years, and William Markham laughed in that soft baritone of his and led her to a plaited rattan chair.

"Sit here, my dear," he said, returning to his place behind the desk. "It is my coolest chair." He motioned toward the open window. "Summer will soon be upon us and a hot one, too, I fear, if today is a reliable witness." A quick smile spread across his mouth. In his white suit and black string tie, William Markham looked like the country lawyer he was. Yet Emilie knew that he could have been more, for he had studied at Harvard, and had practiced for over a decade in the city of Philadelphia before returning to St. Agathe. Like Emilie, Markham had felt himself to be a stranger elsewhere in the world and it had been only a question of time until he returned home.

"Does St. Agathe seem much changed to you, Emilie?" he said, trying to set her at ease.

"A few new buildings and some faces I did not recognize, both to be expected, I suppose, after five years. Otherwise, all seemed as it was when I left."

He nodded thoughtfully. "Sometimes changes take place out of sight, below the surface, rising slowly." His manner brightened. "We have made one change for the better around here. Culture has arrived to this town of ours in the person of our own music teacher. You never met him, of course. His name is Phillip McQuade and he studied at the Sorbonne University in Paris, France, and in addition to being inclined toward the arts he has practiced law, though he no longer does so. Phillip is a handsome young fellow, a fine young man who imparts what knowledge he can to some of our sons and daughters. Now and then, Phillip arranges a musicale at which his prize pupils perform, and occasionally he plays the piano himself, a real treat."

"He sounds very nice."

"Yes. And since he maintains his interest in the law—Phillip reads all the journals—I frequently consult with him about a case. He is a wise and perceptive young fellow." William Markham paused and pursed his mouth. "St. Agathe has another new citizen," he said with calculated deliberateness.

"Oh."

"His name is Roger Whitman."

"Should the name be meaningful to me?" She smiled quizzically.

The lawyer made a steeple with his fingers and peered at her across the apex. "Did you know that Mavis had been married before she ever met your father?"

The question was startling, ominous somehow, and she felt her extremities go cold. "No, I didn't."

"She was only seventeen, at the time, as a matter of fact."

"I'm sure my father never knew that."

"Perhaps not. In any case, her husband was a man named Frank Whitman, a man much older than Mavis who died of a heart attack, trying to match the rather strenuous pace set by his energetic and ambitious wife. Mavis had supposed that Whitman was quite wealthy, but in fact he was not, and the only asset left her by the dead man was a son, Roger."

"There was never any mention made of a son," Emilie said. "I could not have forgotten."

Markham sighed. "It seems that young Whitman was brought up in Chicago and travelled around quite a bit. When Mavis married your father, young Whitman remained in the background. Suddenly, about a year ago, the young man appeared in St. Agathe and took up residence. He told no one of his relationship to Mavis, nor did she. But no sooner did she die than he appeared before me, claiming to be the heir to Foxhollow."

Emilie gasped and her hand went to her mouth. Foxhollow was *hers*. It had to be. Without it, life would be empty and futile, meaningless. She wanted to protest, to cry out, to sound her alarm, but William Markham continued speaking.

"I quickly disabused him of that idea. The property passes to you as per the instructions in your father's will. Mavis retained control of Foxhollow only during her lifetime. It was not hers to will to anyone else."

A sigh of relief broke across Emilie's lips. "I could not bear it were I to lose Foxhollow."

The lawyer frowned. "Roger Whitman is a determined and volatile young man and he was extremely agitated at what I told him and vowed to take steps against the situation. What he intends I do not know. The will seems strong enough to me."

"Are you certain?"

Markham shrugged. "As certain as I can be. Still, who can say what might happen in a court of law should he decide to test it? I believe it might be wise for me to obtain another legal opinion. Perhaps, if you have no objections, I'll consult with Phillip McQuade, just for confirmation."

"Of course."

"And we'll have an official reading of the will at Foxhollow one week from today, if that's satisfactory."

"Yes. I would like all of these unpleasantries to be settled as rapidly as possible."

"It may be advisable to have Mr. Whitman present, so the terms are clear to him."

"Whatever you think best."

He nodded. "If only Whitman were as good with people as he is with horses. He works at the stables, you see, and lives in a small old hut on the north side of town. He has managed to make himself quite unpopular with a good portion of the population. He is a rather fierce young man with a reputation for brawling and a way with the ladies. It's said that over in Manchac . . ." He broke off. "But that sort of thing is not for your ears. Now," he went on briskly, "have you been to Foxhollow yet?"

"I spent the night at the slave quarters with the Johnsons. Billy Joe drove me into town. The big house was shuttered and locked."

"My doing, I'm afraid. There had been rumors of trespassers and that, coupled with Whitman's presence, convinced me to take no chances. I'll have it opened today."

"I would like the Johnsons to work in the house again, now that I'm back."

His lips pursed pensively. "There will be little money with which to pay servants, I can tell you now. The land has lain fallow for too long and there is virtually no income from the tenant farmers."

"I don't think Mary or Billy Joe care about that. They are as much a part of Foxhollow as I am and want to be in their rightful places."

"These will not be easy times for you, Emilie. You have the house and the land, but nothing else."

"I'll make do," she said, wishing she felt as confident as she made herself sound.

"You are a fine woman, Emilie, a true Navard."

His face lengthened as he uttered those words and his eyes clouded over. There was no doubt in Emilie's mind as to what he was thinking, for the same terrible thought was spinning through her brain. She *was* a Navard, a *true* Navard woman, by heritage and by blood, and therefore the full family legacy was hers, the Curse that struck so frequently at Navard women, the heritage of madness. She shuddered, but kept her face expressionless, and made her eyes hold his.

"Treat me with no undue tenderness, Mr. Markham," she said. "I am no child to be protected and pampered. I am woman enough to accept *all* the responsibilities of Foxhollow, to meet them directly."

He appraised her for a long, silent measure. "You are a courageous creature, my dear, as any daughter of Pierre Navard must surely be."

How wrong he was! For it was not strength and courage that flowed in her veins, but only weakness and unbridled terror. So deeply did she fear the madness, that for a long time she had scrutinized each word of hers, and each act, to make certain it was rooted in reason and good sense. She resisted acting on impulse, afraid that it might unloose the obsessiveness of a mounting madness. It was for this reason, as much as her almost obsessive

shyness, that Emilie had led such a sheltered and withdrawn existence during her exile in New York City. Life there had been of a more insistent nature, a heightened tempo, than she was used to, but she wanted no pressures put upon her to loosen an already unsteady emotional grip that could send her mind skittering off on flights of fancy from which there might be no return.

So it was that she had found modest lodgings with a proper family and worked as a tutor of the French language to the children of the wealthy. She had a skill for teaching and many of her students acquired excellent accents.

But, aside from her work, Emilie had made a point of remaining apart from the stream of social life in the city, spending her spare moments at concerts and in museums. She read much and tried not to think about the past, or the forbidding future. Her solitary existence was perhaps less than ideal, but it was comfortable and relatively untroubled. Yet always vaguely persistent, was the knowledge that one day the Navard Curse would indeed claim her, even as it had her mother, and her mother before that, and she craved desperately to postpone that terrifying inevitability for as long as possible. She made a determined effort to wipe away such morbid thoughts, and brought her attention back to William Markham.

"It is my intention," she said, in a controlled voice, "to return Foxhollow to some level of its past glories."

William Markham tugged at his lean aristocratic chin. "That will take a mighty effort, Emilie, for Foxhollow is no longer the almost limitless plantation of the past. Your father managed to hold on to most of the land, but his widow revealed no compunction when it came to selling huge allotments of the estate. That first year, after your father died, she sold everything below Twin Point on the river out to the county line. With time, she made other sales. Section by section it went, whenever Mavis needed money, and as executrix of your father's will, she

had the right to do this. She spent every penny she ever got, of course, and now the money and the land is gone. What remains is but a distressingly small portion of a once grand plantation."

Emilie sighed and tried to smile. "It is still Foxhollow and I will do what I can with it and for it."

He grunted under his breath. "You have seen the house, ravaged by time and neglect. So it is with the land also. To refurbish Foxhollow will take money and materials and considerable hard work. As for the land itself —nature has not been kind to it."

"I will do my best," she said, straightening. "I must."

"And I shall do what I can to help. But expect no miracles. These last years have seen poor crops and there is little cash for improvements." She stood to leave and he rose too. "I will ride back to Foxhollow with you, Emilie, and open the house myself."

"How kind you are."

"You are my friend's daughter and I hope you will permit me to be your friend, also."

They had just crossed Dew Creek when the thought came stabbing into Emilie's mind and she put the question to him. "How did Mavis die?"

He averted his face. "We provided her with the finest funeral possible," he murmured. "She was buried in the family cemetery, as your father would have wished, I'm sure."

She studied his profile. "Neither Billy Joe nor Mary wanted to talk about Mavis, or the manner of her death. Now you avoid the subject. Why?"

He exhaled audibly. "It was rumored that Mavis had taken to drink during all of her waking hours, Emilie, seldom entertaining sobriety. She was an unhappy woman with few friends, and to most of the people hereabout she was looked upon as an outsider. The abrasive quality of her personality did little to encourage friendships." He hesitated, then hurried on. "She died a violent death, Emilie. Her body was found at the base of the

grand staircase in the big house. Her neck had been broken, in tumbling down those stairs, I suppose. A shattered whisky decanter was nearby. Obviously, Mavis had been drinking heavily, and had tripped and fallen. She had cut herself on the broken glass and there was much blood to be seen. No one was witness to the unhappy affair."

Emilie could not help but feel pity for Mavis, dying alone and unaided, victim of her corruption. This explained the Johnson's reluctance to discuss the matter. The drinking of the mistress of a great plantation wasn't considered fit conversation for Negro servants along the Delta, where there were always folks whose lives were so mean and spare that they were able to find pleasure only in hatred aimed at others.

"How sad for Mavis," Emilie said softly, as the carriage bounced along the road between the giant oak trees.

Minutes later they stopped in front of the big house and Billy Joe hurried to help Emilie down. She waited for William Markham to join her on the veranda. He searched through his pockets until he came up with the key to the carved front doors.

"There is one more thing I should tell you, now, Emilie. Queries have been made about Foxhollow from a number of sources, agents for various manufacturing concerns, industries seeking suitable sites on which to locate their plants. They need river land so as to have easy and inexpensive water transportation both north to the great population centers and south through New Orleans to the sea and the markets of Europe. Foxhollow could bring a substantial amount of money, if you were to sell it, enough to allow you to live in luxury for your remaining years."

A hot flush spread under Emilie's cheeks. Sell Foxhollow! *Never!* A series of related images fluttered quickly across the screen of her mind. Her father, her grandparents, all the others who had preceded them, the people who had worked the land, built the houses, called

Foxhollow their home; they could not be deserted, betrayed.

"Foxhollow is not for sale," she said softly, gazing up at the ancient façade, seeing not its present decreptitude, but its past beauty and dignity instead. "It is my home and shall always be. It is where I intend to make my life and where I intend to die."

Perhaps Emilie might have spoken otherwise had she even guessed how close that prophecy was to fulfillment.

chapter FOUR

There was a presence to Foxhollow, as if its spacious chambers and hallways, its alcoves, the grand staircase, were all populated by the memories of past inhabitants. Five days had passed since William Markham had opened the house for Emilie, five days of dedicated work and application. She labored to clean and put matters in order, and working not a bit less feverishly were Mary and Billy Joe. The act of restoring the great house to some semblance to livability was a bond that brought the three of them closer. There were things unspoken among them that all understood, as befitted beings with the same heritage, the same value system, the same way of life.

Working hard was good for Emilie, and there was little time to think or to dwell on the unhappiness that had once existed in this house. And when she found herself passing under the high-ceilinged rotunda of the Great Hall, with its marble floor and statuary, and the broad staircase down which Mavis had fallen and died, she forced herself to consider other matters.

Soon the house, if not glittering, was livable, and a sense of unrest came alive in Emilie. She had been sleeping in her own room, a small chamber in the south wing. But somehow that was unsatisfactory and a change seemed in order. Which room did she want? Her mind ticked off the various bedrooms, discarding one after another, until only one remained—Mavis' room!

A shudder went through her, yet she could not turn her thoughts away from that room. It occupied the northwest corner of the house, facing the river, and from its fine gallery the view was breathtaking. It was a large room with high ceilings and thick walls and it had always belonged to the mistress of Foxhollow. It was a room full of memories of her heritage, the room of her ancestors, a room that had seen life come into being—Emilie herself had been born in that room—and had seen life expire. But always it came back to one thing—this was Mavis' room, and Emilie wanted to occupy it now.

How odd, she thought, *to desire and dread a room at the same time*. To sleep there would be to experience all sorts of unpleasant and unsettling sensations, for she knew the sense of Mavis would still remain within its confines. Yet that was the only room she craved.

So it was, with dusk falling fast on that particular day, Emilie mounted the grand staircase and made her way along the balcony and down the corridor to that corner room. She stood outside the polished mahogany door with her hand on the gleaming ceramic knob and hesitated. The space allotted to this room seemed so much greater than the dimensions within it, as if the walls were especially thick and impenetrable in order to protect whoever slept there. She turned the knob and felt the door give way, and she walked inside.

Mary had cleaned the room thoroughly, changed the bed linens, and hung fresh lace curtains, yet there remained an impression of time and age, almost of putrefaction. The air was sickly sweet with the scent of the perfume that Mavis had always worn, a rich, cloying smell. Quickly, Emilie flung open the French doors leading to the gallery and breathed in the clean aroma of the afternoon. She turned back inside, feeling dwarfed, diminished inside and out, as if trying to fit herself into a world too huge for her.

She glanced around. The bed was a great old affair with four heavy gleaming oak posts and a carved headboard and footboard to match. At each side of the head

stood a small, marble topped commode on which was a kerosene lamp. Against the far wall, was a fine inlaid writing desk. Emilie could visualize Mavis seated there, composing a note. A gold, velvet-covered chaise lounge stood alongside, and it was here that Mavis took her ease, reading, or resting. Across the room was another door which led to a short passageway to another room, equally large but fitted more masculinely. This was her father's room. It occurred to Emilie that maintaining separate bedrooms had not been her father's idea. Mavis had insisted upon it, demanding her privacy. Emilie made a silent vow that when she married she would spend her nights close to her husband in warm affection and love.

Almost compulsively now, she was drawn to the wardrobe, a large walnut creation that covered more than half of the south wall. Behind those dark doors was all that remained of Mavis Navard: all her fine and stylish gowns, her expensive coats, her shoes, her furs, her fabulous collection of hats. Emilie opened the doors and gazed at the clothing within, awed by the extent and variety of the dead woman's wardrobe. A vagrant thought came to mind: Emilie was the same size as Mavis had been and these clothes could be hers simply for the taking. The thought of owning a marvelous wardrobe, complete and colorful, rich and fashionable, was almost overwhelming. It was a magical moment, one to linger over, to savor. Did she dare wear Mavis' clothes? Mavis had been spectacularly beautiful while she was plain, simple. She turned to the mirror hanging over the Victorian chest and studied her image. Her hands reached instinctively, undid the pins that restrained her hair, watched it tumble below her shoulders, a rich dark-brown mass of ringlets. Her face seemed transformed, softer, the features classical. Perhaps it would be possible to wear Mavis' clothes. And were she to do so, would people find her as strikingly attractive as they had Mavis? Mavis was dead, she warned herself, and it was futile to compete with her memory.

All at once a strange sensation took hold of Emilie. It

was as if Mavis were *not* dead, and her own presence in that room was unwelcome, as if she were an intruder in her own home. She fought against the feeling and tried not to think about Mavis. It was impossible. As in life, Mavis made her presence felt. Emilie wondered about her death, wanted to know the details of it. Yet who was there to provide them? William Markham had said that no one witnessed the accident. How could he be sure? Perhaps there had been a witness and perhaps it had been no accident. Emilie felt a tightness in her middle. Why would anyone want to murder Mavis?

Murder. The word alone sent chills dancing along her spine and she forced her mind in other directions. It was silly to imagine what was unimaginable, to create a problem where none existed, to allow her wildly unfettered imagination to roam freely and unchecked. *There must*, she told herself firmly, *be an end to such thinking.*

A creaking board! Emilie whirled around. The sound had come from the other room, from the room her father used to occupy. But there should be no one there. There was an unsteadiness in her limbs as she forced herself to open the door, to move haltingly along the passageway. The door to the other room stood slightly ajar. Slowly, she reached for it and it swung open on creaking hinges.

"Is someone . . ."

Another creaking board and the sound of shuffling feet. "Yas, Miss Emilie, I'm here."

It was Mary, interrupted at her cleaning, gazing quizzically at her mistress. "Somethin' troublin' you, Miss Emilie?"

An airiness seemed to pass around Emilie as if she were weightless and floating free. Her brain felt as if it were detached and distant, working separately and apart from the rest of her. She struggled to retain her equilibrium and a nervous giggle broke out of her.

"I'm just fixin' up your daddy's room."

The memory of Pierre Navard was in every corner of

this room, even stronger than the remembrance of Mavis had been. She could see him now lying in his bed, propped up by soft, white pillows, looking pale and weak, coughing and trying to conceal from her the pain he felt. Tears appeared in her eyes and she blinked to hold them back.

"You all right, Miss Emilie?"

She swallowed. "I'm fine, thank you."

Mary straightened, her massive head cocked to one side, measuring Emilie. "You look like you frightened o' somethin', Miss Emilie."

Emilie breathed deeply. "No," she said. "I'm not frightened of anything. There is nothing for me to be frightened of." She heard the belligerence in her voice, wanted to control it, to hide it, but couldn't. "Foxhollow is mine, Mary, by every right, and there is nothing here that can do me harm."

Mary's eyes narrowed and her full mouth tightened. Now it was she who seemed troubled, frightened, and it was as if Emilie could penetrate the old servant's mind and read her thoughts. She turned away.

"You take care o' yourself, Miss Emilie, hear!"

Emilie swung back, fear and resentment mingling in her. "I know perfectly well how to take care of myself."

Mary rocked her head from side to side. "I remember your mammy saying likewise before she got taken with the . . ." Her mouth closed with a determined finality.

Emilie felt faint. She swayed as she turned and made her way out of the room. *Everybody knows*, she thought. And they were all waiting, waiting for the family heritage to settle on her. She paused at the head of the staircase, gazed with blurred eyes down to where Mavis had fallen, had died. Her hands reached for the balustrade and gripped it tightly as a volley of images came flooding back into her memory—all the terror of when her mother was stricken, the screams of madness sounding in these halls, the despair and pain etched on her father's face, the agonizingly slow death and the anguish of living with

insanity. Over the years she had managed to shield herself from it, to keep from thinking about it, from *knowing* about it.

But there was no way of excluding it from her consciousness now that she was back at Foxhollow and the years had brought her closer to her terrible destiny. It was at age thirty that the Navard women succumbed. Thirty! Only three years remained. Three years—little time in which to live, unless, of course, she was one of the fortunate few who avoided the madness. It was possible, she assured herself. Others before her had done so. It was simply a matter of being careful, of taking care of herself, of eliminating unnecessary stresses from her life, allowing no tension or worry to clutter her mind. Yes, that was what she had to do, and then everything would be all right.

But she didn't really believe it. Not for a minute.

chapter FIVE

There was a deliberateness about the striking of the grandfather clock in the reception hall. It was ten o'clock, and its chimes echoed throughout the house as if each signified more than just the passing of time. Emilie stood on the gallery of Mavis' room—No, it was *her* room now—and gazed out at the fine smooth slope of greenery that stretched down to the river's edge. Her eyes ranged to the south, to where the stand of birch and poplar began, to where she had imagined seeing someone that first evening upon her return. Had it been her imagination, she wondered now. There was no way of knowing.

She retreated into the room and took a final glance at herself in the mirror. It was time to go downstairs, to meet with William Markham and learn the details of her father's will. It was then that the dream returned to her, the dream that had been so vivid and disturbing during the previous night. She had been running, cavorting happily across the fields and meadows of Foxhollow, free and gay with girlish enthusiasm, skirts flaring as she ran, hair bouncing across her shoulders, eyes bright and laughing. Without warning, *he* was there. A man with a face blankly ominous, devoid of all features—yet mocking, hollow laughter emanated from that faceless horror, and tapered fingers pointed. Her eyes travelled in the direction he indicated and she saw a large door. She floated

toward it obediently, afraid to question or disobey. The huge portal swung open silently and she passed through and found herself on a wide, bat veranda. Suddenly she carried luggage in each hand, and it dragged heavily at her arms and her hands trembled at the effort, and there was a deep spreading ache in her shoulders.

A glance backwards revealed the blank face and the steady finger close behind. She stumbled clumsily down a flight of shallow steps and found her feet mired in a thick, clinging swamp that reached wetly to pull her down. Moving became an effort and she felt all strength drain out of her body.

Behind, on the edge of the veranda, the faceless creature stood guard, a pervading, merciless laughter rising out of him like a mist, and now the laughter formed into words, a booming crescendo like the clap of doom.

She had awakened trembling and afraid.

What did it mean? Who was ordering her to leave Foxhollow, for that was certainly where she had been in the dream? And what did the faceless man represent? She had no answers and gave up trying to find them, though she feared the dream might very well be a harsh projection of her own future.

A knock interrupted her ruminations and she made an effort to appear bright and unworried. She opened the door. Mary stood there.

"Lawyer Markham and some gentlemen is here," she announced. "Lawyer Markham say he wants to talk to you a few minutes in private, he say."

"Oh," Emilie said. "Well, show the other gentlemen into the library and ask Mr. Markham to join me here, please."

She wondered who the other two men were, and why William Markham had asked them along. Surely her father's will concerned no one else. Before she could grow too agitated, there was another knock and William Markham entered, carrying a large bouquet of lemon-colored roses. Emilie smiled and all the trepidation faded into the background. Cultivating roses had been the favorite pas-

time of LuAnn Markham, William's wife, and since her death he had continued to grow them in her memory, the only woman he had truly loved.

"Thank you," Emilie said, kissing his cheek.

He smiled down at her and more than a hint of his youthful handsomeness remained. Emilie recalled having heard that he had been something of a ladies' man, frequently travelling down-river to New Orleans, where, it was said, he made his presence known in no uncertain fashion. There was considerable drinking and gambling and one or two duels, it was rumored, plus a roster of lovely ladies only too happy to provide company for such a young and handsome and gracious product of the Old South. But that had been before William Markham had met and married LuAnn Guerin, of Memphis, one of the most beautiful girls of the region.

Around St. Agathe, people still remarked on the wooing and winning of LuAnn by William Markham. She had been only sixteen, on a shopping trip to New Orleans with her mother and her maiden aunt, when the young lawyer had first laid eyes on her. The three ladies had just come out of an exclusive shop on Canal Street when William Markham spied them. He had raised his tall gray hat in a courtly flourish and bowed low in exaggerated fashion, causing young LuAnn to titter behind an upraised hand as he staggered and almost fell. But when he looked up into her hazel eyes, his glance was steady and probing, deeply personal, and her laughter quickly died. Although she knew modesty demanded otherwise, she was unable to avert her gaze.

"May I present myself, ladies," William Markham had said, holding his head high and his shoulders erect, but already LuAnn's mother and aunt were hurrying her along the broad avenue, offended by the forward and not at all sober young man.

William Markham would not be put off. He made inquiries, discovered the identity of the young beauty, and where she lived, and arranged, through mutual friends, to be formally introduced. He never did receive

the wholehearted approval of Mrs. Guerin, nor of her husband, but that did not stop him. He courted LuAnn with a fervor seldom seen in those parts—meanwhile applying himself to his law practice with energy and sobriety—until he won her interest, her affection, and finally her love and her hand. The wedding took place in Memphis, and people flocked from all over the South to attend, for the Guerins were people of quality, and William Markham, though somewhat wild, was considered to be a young man with a future.

They honeymooned in Europe, a glorious year of travel and adventure, and then returned to St. Agathe where William had established his law practice and from where he hoped to launch a political career that would carry him to the State House, perhaps even to the Senate in Washington. It was not to be. Three months later, LuAnn, in the prime of her youth and beauty, was dead, victim of a blood disease for which the doctors knew no cure.

Around St. Agathe, it was said that William Markham had never stopped loving that young bride of his, and no one had ever known him to lavish personal attention on any other young lady, though he was always courteous and charming with women.

At this moment, to Emilie, he seemed altered, his eyes flat and lifeless, with none of the usual good humor in his face. Was it only time that had changed him, she wondered, and was this the inevitable alteration that took place during her absence, or was there a specific reason for the somber quality of expression and manner? Her thoughts lingered on the events that had occurred at Foxhollow over the last five years. First, her father's untimely death, and then Mavis' violent demise. Lawyer Markham was a sensitive man and would not remain untouched in the face of disaster. She forced such thoughts out of her mind and made herself smile up at him.

"You wanted to talk to me privately, Mr. Markham? How pleasant for me."

She had kept her voice gay and playful but he failed to respond in kind, his brow knitted and his eyes probing. "I wanted to speak of a certain matter before reading the will in front of the others."

The others! Before she could speak of that he went on. "I prefer that you be forewarned." A vein began to throb warningly in her temple and she held herself very still. "Pierre Navard was not a businessman, Emilie, but he nevertheless possessed a practical side to his nature, especially where Foxhollow was concerned. Many times he spoke to me of the responsibility he felt to the land and to his ancestors who had made the place what it was."

"I feel the same responsibility," she said quietly.

He nodded and went on. "I am sure you do. And that is why I speak now. Your father could not ignore the crippling malady that seemed to strike down so many Navard women over the years, and so in his will he took steps to protect the plantation." He paused, studied her face, and went on rapidly. "Should you marry, Foxhollow will pass to your husband upon your death, unless there are children, in which case, the property will be divided among them equally." He paused and looked away. "Should some illness strike . . ." His voice caught and his eyes held steadily on her own. "Should illness strike and it became necessary that you be confined. . . ."

"The madness, you mean?"

"Yes." The word came out flat and toneless. "Should you too fall victim to the family curse and thus be rendered incapable of administering Foxhollow, it will come under the complete control of your husband."

She stared off into space, chewing at her lip, and when she spoke finally it was in a small and distant voice. "You believe that like my mother I will be afflicted?"

"Of course not!" he said, with an attempt at heartiness. "But it is my duty to face all the possibilities, no matter how remote. The affliction could descend again on the house and it is best to be prepared."

Emilie made a powerful effort to gather her strength,

fight off the weakness that gripped her, the fogginess that clouded her mind. This was a time for firmness and fortitude, and she meant to exercise both.

"You are right, sir, of course. I was only a child when my mother became ill and my memory of it, though vivid, is limited. How will I know if I am falling victim to this unhappy visitation?"

"It will not happen to you," he said grimly.

"It might," she persisted.

He exhaled audibly. "There is a period of dizziness, I've been told, of general disorientation. You will not be conscious of where you are or what is happening. And a kind of general suspiciousness will take hold, making you see danger and enemies where there is only love and friendship. Your memory will go and there will be a period of hallucinations before the terminal point."

"Thank you for telling me."

There was no mistaking the deep concern etched on his face. "Shall we go downstairs, now?"

She took his arm. "There is one more thing, the question of Mavis' death. As I recall, Mavis was not the sort of person accidents happened to. She seemed strong and certain in control always."

"Yes, so it appeared. Yet for all her bravado and domineering spirit, she was caught in the web of other people's opinions. She wanted to be accepted by the old families of the county after she became mistress of Foxhollow, but she never was. It is my opinion that most people held her responsible for Pierre's death, feeling that had she been less demanding, less drivingly ambitious, he might have survived. That is only conjecture, of course."

"But as to her death . . . ?"

He shrugged. "Mavis began drinking shortly after you departed for New York City. And soon the word got out. She was shunned more than ever and soon was seldom seen. She stayed here and accepted visits only from certain admirers, menfolk who came from distant places. There were rumors of wild evenings and of endless drinking, but that was only talk and I have no first-hand

knowledge to substantiate it. A woman living alone, drinking heavily, dissatisfied with her lot, yet unable to change it, might very well fall victim to her own weaknesses, might very well have a mortal accident."

He paused as they began descending the great staircase. When they reached the bottom, the place where Mavis had died, he spoke again. "There was a man, a special man, apparently, who called on Mavis with some regularity. But his identity was never established, though he was seen from time to time. But he seemed to have ceased visiting shortly before Mavis' demise. Then, on a Monday, Mary and Billy Joe came back to Foxhollow—they had been over to Salina City to visit with some kinfolk—to find Mavis lying dead in her own blood at the foot of the staircase . . ."

A vision of the beautiful Mavis floated into Emilie's mind, Mavis in one of those spectacular gowns of hers, white teeth flashing, eager eyes vibrant and passionate. Alive. Then Emilie glanced down at the spot where she stood, to the place where Mavis had sprawled dead and she could almost see the broken body, a look of anguish on that classic face, no longer vibrant, no longer beautiful. She shivered and turned away.

"Shall we get on with the business at hand?" Markham asked.

"Oh, yes. Let's end these technicalities forever. You've brought other men with you?"

"Yes. Roger Whitman, for one. I told you I would ask him to come, to settle his claim once and for all."

She felt herself go tense at the mention of Mavis' son. She nodded. "I had forgotten."

"And I also asked Phillip McQuade to witness the reading. I thought that to have the benefit of his legal background . . ."

His voice faded into the background and as it did the dream of the previous night came seeping into her mind. There again was the faceless man ordering her to leave Foxhollow, his mocking laughter sending terror coursing along her veins. All at once she made that ghostly image

out to be connected with one of the men waiting now in the library. Was she to be deprived of her legacy in life as in the dream? The thought was unsettling and she struggled to control her nerves. They stood before the library door and William Markham smiled kindly at her, expectantly. She looked up at him and tried to return the smile. It wouldn't come.

They went into the library.

chapter SIX

The vast differences between the two men in the library were evident from the moment Emilie entered the room. One of them stood quickly when she appeared, bowed stiffly, politely; he was tall and broad-shouldered, face darkly lean, his eyes black and piercing, his mouth sensuous and unsmiling. His handsomeness was startling and those eyes held to hers so steadily as to be unnerving. She felt stripped naked, body and soul, as if immediately this stranger knew all there was to know about her, leaving her no secrets, no privacy. A flood of hollowness pressed down on her middle and she turned instinctively to William Markham.

"Permit me to introduce Phillip McQuade," the lawyer said grandly. "My friend and occasional colleague. Mr. McQuade has displayed an interest in purchasing Foxhollow."

Those last two words ripped through the attraction Emilie felt for this Phillip McQuade, tore it away, turned it into a defensive shield, and resentment and anger flared behind it. There was a dull pounding at the base of her skull. Sell Foxhollow! *Never.*

"Foxhollow is not for sale," she said coldly.

"Of course," Phillip McQuade said in a voice deep and resonant. "I can understand your deep attachment." A hint of amusement tugged at the corners of his fine mouth.

She wanted to apologize for the rudeness of her tone, but how could she explain her attitude about this house, this land, its history and traditions, its future? No words could express her feelings, the special meaning possessed by the hundreds of objects large and small that belonged to Foxhollow—her father's grand piano, and the cut glass sherry decanter that even at that moment stood on the fine, old, carved oak table along the wall, the portraits of the grave-looking Navard men, and the beautiful women they married, the old furniture and the hand-loomed carpets, and all the other things, precious and otherwise, that weaved through her life and provided meaning and fullness. Foxhollow *was* her life and would always be so. Her body trembled with emotion and she struggled to control it, but it was clear to them all how deeply upset she was.

It was then she felt the presence of the third man in the library and her eyes darted to where he sat. Only now did he make even an attempt to rise, pushing himself halfway out of the highbacked wing chair, nodding arrogantly, falling back indolently. Blond hair, long and thick, curling behind his ears, framed aristocratic features; he had a large and powerful body, and now his head was sunk low between great, thick shoulders as he surveyed the room like some ancient monarch. Even as her eyes bridged the distance between them, Emilie felt a barrier spring into place, a transparent wall designed not only to keep them apart, but to mark the difference between them.

This, then, was Roger Whitman, Mavis' offspring, and so like her in many ways. All the threat, the incipient danger, the arrogance that had existed in the mother, emanated from the son. A haughty expression masked that pale face and his eyes, icily blue and unblinking, scrutinized Emilie clinically, as if she were some sort of a laboratory specimen. She tried to read beneath the surface glitter. What was it she saw? Venality? Scorn? Loathing? Now, as if heralding his contempt, Roger

Whitman shifted his position, and to Emilie the movement clearly indicated that he was not a man to have for an enemy, and yet already she felt exuding from him a deep animosity.

Silence hung in the air, heavy and ill-fated. It was William Markham's steady voice that sundered it, making the final introductions. Emilie acknowledged Roger Whitman politely; he only grunted and swung away.

"Shall we get on to the business at hand?" Markham said, extracting a legal document from his pocket.

Emilie reminded herself that she was mistress of Foxhollow and must act accordingly. She arranged a neat smile on her mouth and directed herself to William Markham.

"I am ready," she said sitting.

"Then we begin," he said, turning to the will. "Whereas, I Pierre Nevard," he read aloud, "am of sound mind and body . . ."

The reading of the will took perhaps twenty minutes and there were no surprises in it. All of Foxhollow, the land and the buildings on that land, were left to Emilie, with instructions that she continue to see to the welfare of those persons living and working on the property, something she intended to do anyway.

As William Markham's voice droned on, Emilie sat stiffly, hands folded in her lap, trying to concentrate on his words. But her eyes came to rest on the cut glass decanter of sherry on the oak table and suddenly she thirsted for a draught of the amber liquid. She needed something to help quell the increasing turmoil leaping across the poles of her brain, for an alarming and persistent thought nagged at her even as the will was being read—that she was going to lose Foxhollow! It was a terrifying prospect and she was unable to push it aside. She cautioned herself. This was only her rather active imagination at work, and there was no real threat to her ownership, no one, present or elsewhere, wished her ill. Still the sense of danger persisted, grew more intense

and her desire for a sip of sherry became more pronounced. She looked around. There was an uncomfortable silence in the room.

All three men were staring at her, and for a split second she was certain that she had done something strange and terrible. Trying to maintain a calm exterior, she found herself stuttering.

"W-w-what's the matter?"

William Markham's voice was edged with impatience. "We have been discussing your legacy, Emilie. It is incumbent upon you to pay attention."

"I'm sorry." She felt her cheeks grow warm and her fingers plucked nervously at the lace handkerchief in her lap. "Forgive me. I'm listening now."

"Mr. Whitman has raised the question of Mr. McQuade's offer to purchase Foxhollow, as well as the industrial offers that have been made . . ."

Without knowing it, she stood up, eyes fluttering, hands moving insistently, voice rising.

"I told you I would never sell Foxhollow. Never. And I wish to hear no more of such talk."

William Markham gazed at her with surprise, as if this firm resolution was the last thing he had expected from her. "Emilie, consider this: the upkeep on an estate like Foxhollow is enormous. How will you manage? There are no funds."

"I'll find a way." There was no mistaking her agitation, and her mouth worked inexorably as if she sought words that would not come. Moisture glistened in her eyes and Phillip McQuade, watching her closely, rose, hands spread apologetically.

"Miss Navard, forgive me, please, for being so persistent. My own appreciation of Foxhollow has blinded me to your private needs. I will press the matter no further."

"Thank you. I appreciate your consideration."

"*But I do not!*" It was Roger Whitman who had spoken, voice thin and harsh, biting, coming out of his chair with surprising swiftness, his movements lithe and athletic, his pale face livid, a malevolent gleam in his cold

blue eyes. "This property is as rightfully mine as yours, Miss Navard, and I will have some say in its disposition."

"No," Emilie protested in a voice suddenly gone weak and timid.

"Oh, yes," he drawled meaningfully. "You will not decide the future of Foxhollow without concern for my wishes. My mother was mistress here and it was her desire that the land come to me. I will have her will carried through. No half-mad girl is going to steal my rightful heritage . . ."

Phillip McQuade broke in, anger evident in every line of his dark handsomeness, as he moved toward Roger. "Look here, Whitman! We'll have no more of such talk, else I'll be forced to silence you violently."

The two young men, both tall and powerful, faced each other like opposing gladiators. With surprising speed, William Markham moved between them. "There'll be none of that, Phillip. Sit down and permit me to conduct this matter. As for you, Whitman, you were invited here today merely as a courtesy on the part of Miss Navard. You have no *rights* here. Remember that."

Roger Whitman laughed harshly at the elderly lawyer. "You listen to *me*, Mr. Markham, and you too, Miss Navard. I came here today to have my rightful say about Foxhollow. This property is mine . . ."

"No!" Emilie burst out.

"Oh, yes," Whitman said thinly. "Mine only. Oh, I am aware that you and this small-town lawyer of yours believe your father's will can hold in a court of law. But I think otherwise. Foxhollow became the property of my mother upon the death of your father, her *husband*, and when she died the land became my legacy by right of blood and marriage. And I will have it."

"Foxhollow is my home," Emilie protested.

Roger snorted disparagingly. "Sentimental nonsense. A run-down plantation good for nothing or no one. But it belongs to me and I will have it and dispose of it as suits my purposes."

"Roger," William Markham said. "Listen to reason."

"Your claim will not stand up in court," Phillip injected, "and that is an objective legal opinion."

"I agree with Phillip."

Roger laughed without humor. "Naturally. You're all against me and my interests. Well, I expected that and it won't stop me. Miss Navard, you think your name and your position in this community allow you the right to dictate how life will be. I say otherwise and shall so prove. I will fight this matter in every way and if legal means fail there are always other methods to achieve my ends."

"Roger!" Markham cried.

"Whitman," Phillip said, standing again. "I've had about enough of your threats and your rudeness."

Roger's eyes narrowed. "I will not be duped. I will not be cheated. I will not be stopped."

Cold beads of perspiration erupted on Emilie's brow. Reason had left her and she found that she was as frightened of Roger as she had been of Mavis. Now she watched as his blond head jerked and bobbed about wildly, invective and hate spewing out of him.

"This property is mine. And I will have it. I swear that on my life!"

His big fist came slamming down on the oak table causing the decanter to tremble and making a glass dance off the edge of the table onto the floor where it shattered. Emilie felt the room swim and she was afraid she might faint. Her eyes fluttered and a weakness took hold of her knees. From a distance she heard voices, muted, concerned, and firm hands eased her into a chair. Somewhere, a door slammed and the faint realization that Roger Whitman had left seeped through her. It was a comforting thought. Gradually the fog lifted and her eyes rolled open again as she gazed up at the worried faces of William Markham and Phillip McQuade.

"Are you all right, Emilie?" the lawyer asked.

"I think so."

Her eyes searched the library. Roger Whitman *had* gone. She sighed and allowed her head to fall back against the high rear of the chair.

"Mr. Markham," she murmured. "Will he - can he, take Foxhollow away from me?"

She saw the two men exchange glances and was unable to see any firm reassurance in either face. "Don't worry about that now," Markham said. "Perhaps he may cause some trouble, but it will be nothing that we cannot handle quite readily."

We. The word ricocheted around Emilie's brain like an echo. We. At least she was no longer alone. She had allies to help her in this struggle. She had friends.

"I owe it to the memory of your father," Markham was saying, "to make sure that you will always remain the mistress of Foxhollow. And I will work hard to that end."

Her eyes filled with tears and a liquid warmth permeated her being. She tried to conceal this flood of emotion, turning her gaze across the room to the garden beyond the French doors. Her eyes drank in the clear crimson of the rhododendron and the pink faces of the magnolia blooming among them. Everywhere she saw the pastiche of reds and oranges and pinks and the blaze of color soothed her and supported her confidence.

Yes, she told herself, *I am the mistress of Foxhollow. I will always be.*

If only she could truly believe it.

chapter SEVEN

The weeks passed swiftly as Emilie immersed herself in the work of elevating Foxhollow to its once high plane of beauty and graciousness. She labored diligently and, with the aid of Mary and Billy Joe, saw much progress take place. Moments of anxiety and doubt grew less frequent as time elapsed and she grew more confident in her role of mistress of the plantation.

She met with the remaining handful of tenant farmers and pledged them her support in return for their continued work on the land. She asked for their help in repairing the outer walls of the main house, the veranda, the walks, and she received it.

Occasionally, Emilie made it her business to travel to St. Agathe to reacquaint herself with the townspeople, hoping to reestablish old friendships and create new ones. Some—notably Nancy Dunkirk and Jessica Telfer—were quick to accept her. But others were less anxious to have anything to do with a girl who, tradition insisted, was doomed to go mad at any time. They all knew of the Navard Curse and eyed her warily, defensively.

Thus, much of Emilie's spare time was spent alone. She read a lot, especially the plays of William Shakespeare, or she crocheted, or tended the garden, or played on her father's piano. But she longed for human company, for the company of people her own age, people with similar interests, people with mutual ambitions and

hopes. Instead she found loneliness, the same pervading loneliness she had known during those long years in New York.

Loneliness, she soon realized, was a constant of life at Foxhollow, coming and going in its own time, but always close at hand. It was particularly dismal during dinner. She would sit at one end of the long mahogany table, the candelabra flickering in the center, a single gold encrusted dinner plate before her, and nibble half heartedly at her food, reflecting all the while on the desirability of having a man seated opposite, a husband, discussing with her all the matters she fancied they would have in common. He too would love music and paintings, and they could read poetry to each other. She could almost visualize his face through the warm glow of the candlelight. He would be handsome, aesthetic, tall and with strong hands, and his eyes would twinkle good-humoredly. She wondered during such periods if her loneliness would ever disappear.

On this morning, she had been tidying up the music room, dusting the gleaming grand piano, arranging the many artifacts which were so much a part of Foxhollow. As she worked, her eye was taken by the emerald ring which she wore. Once that precious stone had belonged to her father and he used it as a stud in his dress shirt. Emilie had ordered a local jeweler to place it in an ancient gold setting for her. Somehow it seemed more brilliant than ever this morning as the sun's glow caught and transfigured its beauty, illuminating its many facets. In this light, the emerald reflected the yellow of her dress, as well as the crimson of the draperies at the window. She peered deeply into the heart of the stone and it was as if another world awaited there. An image drifted into focus and she strained to make it out. She envisioned her father sitting at his piano and it seemed to her that she could hear the refrains of a Chopin etude in the room.

Slowly, almost reluctantly, her mind returned to the present. It was as if she had captured the memory of

Pierre Navard in that single emerald, and she could see him whenever she wished. The ring was a living link with the past and everything and everyone she had ever loved. A chill slithered along her nerves and reached deep into her middle. She felt unstable suddenly, and for a lengthy interval it was difficult to separate the real from the unreal. She struggled to order her mind. *I must be stern*, she ordered herself, aware that in such fantasizing lay only disaster.

She turned and walked swiftly from the library into the great reception hall, allowing her eyes to range over the high walls, across the great rotunda, to the wide staircase. Her glance lingered at the bottom, at the place where Mavis had fallen, lain unconscious, and died. Panic turned her cold, as shadows appeared to move and alter the shape of things. There was something there, something large and twisted, grotesque in its supine awkwardness. Her hand went to her mouth and she peered into the shadow.

No. It came out of her as a silent protest. *No.* A rustle of terror. *No.* A scream unheard and unsounded. *No, no, no.* It was Mavis whom she saw, huddled on the lowest step, body broken and lifeless, a dark-red pool spreading from under her head. Mavis, dead but come back. Mavis, come to drive her away from Foxhollow once more. *No, no, no . . .*

She ran screaming into the kitchen where Mary was preparing lunch. The old servant glanced up, eyes wide. "Miss Emilie! What is happenin' child?"

"It was Mavis, Mary. I saw her. Dead at the stairway, where she fell, and the blood . . ."

Mary took the sobbing girl into her great arms, pressed her against her bosom, and murmured reassurances into her hair. At last the sobbing ended and Mary wiped her eyes, smiling encouragingly.

"Miss Emilie, Miss Mavis is gone, child, fer once and fer all. She ain't never comin' back. Never. You got to believe that."

"I saw . . ."

"You didn't see nothin'. There ain't no body on the stairs or no place else." She took Emilie's hand in hers. "Let's us go see together."

The steps were bare. No body. No blood. No shattered decanter. Mavis was dead and buried forever. A nervous titter broke out of Emilie.

"I must have been imagining things."

"You been workin' too hard, child. Got to take it easy, have some fun, git to see some folks your own age."

"Yes," Emilie said, a flood of doubt and fear washing over her. This *hallucination*, was this the first evidence of the Navard Curse? Her mind turned feverishly. Lately, she had been forgetting things, letting her mind roam, drifting away from reality. She shuddered and turned to Mary. There was no mistaking the expression of concern on that glistening ebony face, no mistaking what it represented. Mary too was aware of the Curse and its symptoms, more so than anyone else, for she had helped nurse Emilie's mother when she was stricken.

"You got to take good care o' yourself, Miss Emilie," Mary murmured, turning away. "You jes got to . . ."

An overwhelming urge to be outside gripped Emilie, a voracious hunger for sunlight and air and the warmth of the day, for *life*. She rushed into the garden, closing her mind to what had just transpired, refusing to consider it, telling herself that it was just a passing aberration, one that would never return, meaningless and without effect.

The garden was irresistably sweet. Flowers bloomed colorfully around her and she drank in the heady aroma. Dew still glistened on the petals and she held her face up to the eastern sky and felt her skin tingle under the warming sun. She moved slowly among the plants, at peace, smiling distantly, at one with nature. It was gradually that she felt another presence and her head swivelled around. At the eastern treeline a fast-moving figure was coming out of the woods and heading toward her. A horseman. He came on at a full gallop. It was a thing of beauty to see and her heart pounded excitedly. Suddenly,

a darting rabbit, swiftly alarmed by the pounding horse, flashed along the ground, alarming the horse in turn, as it fled for safety. The horse reared, forelegs pawing the air, whinnying frantically, and the rider struggled to regain control. The horse would not be calmed, and it abruptly threw its rider. The man crashed heavily on the ground, and lay still there.

Gasping in fright, Emilie ran as quickly as she could toward the still figure. What if he were seriously injured, she asked herself as she ran. Or dead? The thought constricted her throat and she fought for breath. As last she reached the prone rider, lying face down and not moving. She dropped to her knees at his side and attempted to turn him. It was no use. He was too big, too heavy. A sigh seeped out of him and a moan. He moved his head and a hand rubbed at his bruised forehead.

"Damned rabbit," she thought she heard him say, and stood up quickly, watching warily. He rolled over and stared up at her. "Miss Emilie!"

It was Phillip McQuade.

A smile fanned across his mouth and he folded his hands behind his head and crossed his legs and stared up at her in open admiration. It was reminiscent of the way he had looked at her the first time they met. She blushed.

"Are you hurt, Mr. McQuade?"

"Miss Emilie, what a delightful sight you are to find waiting for me to return to this world."

"Your horse threw you."

He laughed and sat up. "Roger Whitman rented me that horse and I'll wager he trained it to throw me out of sheer meanness."

She smiled and laughed softly in relief. It occurred to her that she didn't want Phillip McQuade to be hurt in any way. She watched him stand up and brush off his riding habit.

"Are you certain you're all right, Mr. McQuade?"

"Give me a moment to collect my scattered wits and I'll tell you." There was a hint of amusement in his voice

and she feared he was laughing at her, at her seriousness, her urgency. Looking at him now, she realized again what a deeply unsettling effect he had upon her. There was a magnetic field around him that drew her interest and her attention, and even more, dulled her faculties, making her feel powerless, ponderous, dependent suddenly upon this stranger for guidance.

At last he straightened up and faced her, a towering man and impressively handsome in the early sunlight. She was particularly glad that she had worn the yellow dress, a color that set off her brown hair so effectively. She turned and took one or two steps back toward the house.

"Where are you off to?" he asked.

She stopped, turned back. "I have my duties, Mr. McQuade. Work to do."

"Won't it keep long enough to exchange a few words with a man battered in body and spirit?"

That made her laugh and he joined in with her, as his dirt-smudged face broke open in genuine good humor, his teeth white and even. She watched him walk over to his horse, a long-legged black gelding, standing a few paces away. He picked up the reins and led the animal back.

"I'll walk up to the house with you, if I may," he said.

"That would be very nice."

They moved slowly, neither speaking, Emilie wishing she had the facility to make small talk, to be clever and witty, but this was a skill that had always eluded her. She felt compelled to break the silence.

"Do you ride often, Mr. McQuade?"

"Yes, I do. Especially in the early morning. I like the power of a horse under me, the excitement of moving fast, of controlling a beast stronger than myself."

He continued to talk, his manner animated, his graceful hands gesturing actively. Deep crevices were imbedded in either cheek, accentuating the bony structure of his face, his eyes wide-spaced, his lose long and straight. He reminded Emilie of a painting she had seen and admired

in an art museum in New York, a portrait by Cezanne. He explained to her that his music gave him little opportunity to do the many things he enjoyed.

"My pupils keep me busy," he confessed. "That and my reading of the law—I maintain my interest, you see. Still, music is my first love."

"And mine," she responded hopefully.

"We seem to have something in common." He smiled warmly at her and Emilie was forced to wrench her eyes away. She willed her hands to remain still, but there was no stilling the insistent flutter of her heart. She cautioned herself to react less emotionally to Phillip McQuade, to his flamboyant good looks, to his overwhelming charm, to his flashing smile. But such warnings did little good, for each time he spoke or favored her with one of his cool, appraising looks, Emilie felt her knees tremble and go weak, felt a fresh surge of wanting spread through her. Now she stole another glance at him. His black riding coat accentuated the breadth of his shoulders, the slimness of his waist, the graceful manner in which he moved. He grinned at her without warning and there was no preventing a hot flush from pinking her cheeks. She told herself she was being as silly as an adolescent with her first crush.

Never had she felt precisely this way. Nor could she recall ever yearning for someone to like her, to approve of her, as much as she did now. And even as that thought skittered around her brain, a sense of her own inadequacy came over Emilie. She felt plain and without appeal, lacking all charm and grace of manner, a woman no truly attractive man would ever crave.

And then she remembered the Curse.

Doubt and fear ebbed back and she couldn't help but wonder how much time remained to her before she was struck down. It seemed inevitable. Already the evidence of her impending fate was clear to see, and this being true, what right had she to consider this man, *any* man, for even a moment? She was doomed to madness and

death while he was young and strong and full of the joy of living.

Sadness settled down on her like a great damp blanket. She supposed Phillip McQuade knew what lay ahead for her; almost everyone around St. Agathe did, she was certain. But did it really matter? For never, not once in her life, had a man such as this wanted her. Always they were attracted to the bright and beautiful women, the clever and humorous women, the women like Mavis. Still, she had to admit that just being with him was more than merely pleasant, and hearing the deep rich tones of his voice, his hearty laughter, stealing glances at his handsome face, all filled her with an unaccustomed joy.

They were nearing the front of the house and Phillip stopped, gazed up at it. "It is a magnificent structure, as is all of Foxhollow."

She followed the gaze. "I hope you're not going to ask me again to sell to you, Mr. McQuade."

He laughed shortly. "No, Miss Navard. Never again. My appreciation for Foxhollow can never match your own." They resumed their walk. "I have always enjoyed coming here and the hours spent in the house left me with a sense of history and the importance of tradition and continuity in our lives."

"I feel exactly the same way." A thought came bursting to mind. "You used to come to Foxhollow frequently?"

He turned to look at her. "Your stepmother, Mavis, was one of my pupils, Miss Navard. I was giving her piano lessons. I thought you knew."

"I did not know."

He shrugged. "She began studying with me soon after I arrived in St. Agathe. She was an excellent student, with good hands and a fine touch on the keys. Her mind was crisp and cultured and she had a fine wit. I must admit that I enjoyed her company immensely, although there was considerable room for questioning her attitudes."

"I don't understand."

"Mavis was not the kindest human being. She lacked consideration and compassion and I often remonstrated with her as to the way she treated the servants. There were many arguments over that." He hesitated. "Perhaps it would be better if we talked less of Mavis and more of other matters."

"But I want to know how it was when I was gone. Please, go on."

He took a deep breath, and plunged ahead. "You know, I suppose, about her drinking habits? Everyone did. It was as if something deep within her soul was tormenting her, driving her on, and she tried mightily to drown the fire with alcohol."

All at once things fell into place for Emilie. Phillip McQuade must be the mysterious visitor Mavis had had, the one who suddenly stopped coming to Foxhollow. Of course! One of their arguments, Emilie assumed, had gotten too disturbing for him, and he had finally had to put an end to their pupil-teacher relationship. She threw a brief sidelong glance his way. How typical of him, to sacrifice a pupil and the income it meant for his principles.

They were at the edge of the veranda now and she paused and turned to him. "Perhaps you would like to come into the house for a moment, Mr. McQuade? Some coffee . . . ?"

He shook his head. "Not this morning, Miss Navard, but soon if I may. I would like very much to come and visit you again, to call on you."

She wet her lips. "If you wish, Mr. McQuade."

"Phillip," he corrected.

A moment later he had leaped astride the big gelding and was galloping down the road between the twin oaks, waving as he went. Emilie waited until he was out of sight before going back into the house. Only now did she give full freedom to her emotions, allowing them to surge through her body on the tide of her heartbeats. She couldn't get Phillip McQuade's face out of her mind,

didn't want to. Instead she gave herself to a succession of fantasies built around him, always coming back to her favorite. She saw herself seated at dinner, elegant, poised, impeccably gowned, and at the far end of the gleaming mahogany table taking his dinner with her was a man, smiling, relaxed, his features fuzzy and indistinguishable at first, but in time a face faded into view, the face of **Phillip McQuade.**

And that night, in the dark of her room, comfortably deep in the big four-poster, in Mavis' bed, an ominous reminder intruded, the memory of what the future held for her, for every Navard woman. Tears came into her eyes and sleep soon became impossible.

Soon, she thought. *Soon she would be like all the others. . . .*

chapter EIGHT

Phillip McQuade. His presence persistently invaded Emilie's world. To stop thinking about him became almost impossible for her and thoughts of him intruded on time that should have been spent at necessary tasks. When she dreamed, she dreamed of him, and often those dreams took place during the daylight hours while her eyes were open and she was fully awake. She imagined all sorts of situations that included Phillip and herself, situations pleasant and fulfilling, excitingly alive.

Frequently she found herself stationed at the window, hoping that he would come galloping up the road on that black gelding, but he never came. Yet she continued to watch for him, certain they would meet again before too much time expired. Then when no word came from him she grew morose and told herself she was a fool to allow herself to become so emotionally involved with a man she barely knew. Now the hours dragged slowly by, each day a ponderous expenditure of time, nothing marking their goings. A weariness encased her flesh often, and she discovered that her energy quotient was so low that she was forced to frequently rest by napping in the early afternoons. These naps soon drew an enigmatic interest from Mary. There was a frown on that great round face and the normally sparkling eyes were guarded and worried.

"You been awful tired lately, Miss Emilie," Mary muttered. "Ain't you sleepin' nights?"

"I sleep all right, Mary. But I have been tired. Perhaps I've been trying to do too much."

Mary grunted. "Mebbe so," she said. "Mebbe not."

Emilie wondered briefly what the servant had been thinking and decided not to pursue the affair. Experience had taught her that Mary revealed only those of her thoughts she chose to reveal, and no amount of probing could loosen her tongue. She expected to learn what was on Mary's mind at a time of her own choosing. It came sooner than Emilie would have guessed.

It was the next afternoon, while taking tea in the music room, that Mary appeared, a neat blue envelope almost totally concealed in her large black hand.

"A messenger brung this fer you."

Emilie tried to quell the sudden irregular beating of her heart. She swallowed hard and arranged her face in what she hoped was a tranquil expression, extending her hand for the envelope. It was from Phillip, she knew. It *had* to be, and she could hardly wait to open it, to read his words, written in his hand.

Mary took a single step forward, paused, mouth clamping shut, eyes steady, arms folded resolutely across her bosom, a picture of determination.

"Well," Emilie said impatiently. "Let me have the message, please."

"Miss Emilie. I got somethin' on my mind that needs sayin'."

Emilie knew Mary well enough to realize there was no turning her aside. She nodded and leaned back in her chair and kept her face still.

"Very well, say it."

"Yes'm." Mary made a production of clearing her throat. "Miss Emilie, you knows that I loves you like you was my own."

"Yes, Mary."

"And that there ain't nothin' I wouldn't do if'n you was to say do it."

"Go on."

"And you knows I worry about you."

"Worry?" A twinge of fear came to life behind Emilie's navel. She wanted this conversation to stop now, to go no further, to touch on nothing that would disturb her, cause her any unhappiness. But Mary was talking. . . .

". . . and you knows how you is always tired, takin' a nap, or stoppin' to rest. Well, it ain't normal fer a young woman like you, especially one that sleeps all night like you do. Ever since Billy Joe and me moved back in the house over the kitchen we been hearin' things. . . ."

"Hearing things!"

"Miss Emilie, you don't sleep quiet and restful. You turn and talk and sometimes you scream out." She lowered her eyes and continued in a soft voice. "Same like it was with your Mama sometimes before she got sickly."

"Oh, no!"

"And Billy Joe says I shouldn't say nothin', but I got to, Miss Emilie. I just got to, cause I love you, child, and I care whut happens around this place." She took a deep breath and stared unblinkingly at Emilie. "You been movin' about in your sleep, gittin' up out o' bed and walkin'. You did it again last night."

Emilie's mouth opened, but no words came out. Through the spreading terror she felt, through the swirling mist that closed around her brain, through the coldness that gripped her extremities, she remembered a night from long ago, a night from her childhood, a night she had been unable to sleep, awakened by a grotesque and awful dream. She had gotten out of bed and headed for her parents' bedroom for the soothing, reassuring presence of their bodies and the warmth of sleeping between them in that great soft bed.

But she had met her mother in the hall, moving slowly, garbed only in her nightdress, which in itself was un-

usual. And her mother had not responded, had not looked at her or spoken, simply shuffled along in that strange and distant manner that was so frightening. Then her father had appeared to reassure her, to send her back to her own room with rare abruptness, never to explain what was happening or why. And now the pattern was being repeated, the pattern that surely heralded the onset of the very affliction that had claimed her mother, and now was extending its tentacles for her. A cold finger seemed to touch the base of her spine, dance upwards in demoniacal glee. She shuddered and brought her eyes back to focus on Mary. She wished the servant would go, leave her alone with the misery that gripped her.

"Mary!" The harshness of her own voice was startling.

"Yes'm?"

"You can go now."

"Yes'm." Mary placed the blue envelope on the grand piano and trundled out of the room.

Almost at once Emilie felt guilty at having spoken so abruptly to the old servant. She wanted to apologize and made a silent vow to do so later. Now her eyes, darting, uncertain, came to rest on the blue envelope and she started out of her chair, became aware of the weakness in her knees and fell back. Her mind reached back to Mary's pronouncement about her nocturnal meanderings. The information seemed conclusive in confirming her worst suspicions. While sleep dulled her senses and lowered her resistance, the Curse stealthily came and took its terrible toll of her sanity. How soon, came the despairing query, before the disease gripped her completely and caused her to act in some wild and destructive fashion, bringing ruin to herself, to Foxhollow, to all those she cared for?

If only she could confide in someone, someone who would understand both emotionally and intellectually, someone with both the desire and the ability to help. She forced herself to think clearly. *William Markham.*

He seemed the most likely one to ask for assistance. But she couldn't be sure. As lawyer for the estate, he might very well entertain a loyalty higher than the one he felt to her, might decide he owed the memory of her father a fealty that would result in removing Emilie from Foxhollow, committing her to some public institution, tuck her away out of sight behind bars like a raving animal. The thought sent waves of anguish racing along her raw nerves and she made a mighty effort to calm herself, to think rationally, to ease the torment that had been mounting ever since her return home. Instead of finding peace at Foxhollow, she had fallen victim to an insidious despair that weighted her down until she felt like a woman drowning in a stormy sea—helpless, futile, cries for help lost amidst the thunderous clamor of the elements.

Tea, she thought irrationally. Another cup of the hot amber liquid would soothe the devils tormenting her spirit. Her reaching hand trembled uncontrollably as she gripped the fine China pot and suddenly it seemed to wrench out of her fingers, torn by some invisible force, to go smashing to the floor. She leaped erect, a scream of anguish filling her throat. She choked it back for fear Mary would hear and thus find new evidence of Emilie's fall from grace. She sank to her knees, muttering and sobbing, breathing with difficulty, trying to clean the mess and to conceal her clumsiness.

Finally, it was done. Slowly, heavily, the effort draining, she straightened, mind ranging ahead, wondering where she could conceal forever the broken pieces of China. The woods, she thought. Deep back in the woods where no one ever went. She would bury the fragments and when Mary came looking for the teapot she would conclude that she herself had misplaced it.

Only when the broken pot was out of sight under a foot of soft black soil, stomped down, camouflaged under leaves and broken twigs, did Emilie feel some sense of tranquility return. Breathing more regularly, she turned and made her way out of the woods and up the

slope to the house. She was halfway there when she remembered the blue envelope lying on the piano. Excitement crowded all other emotions away and she broke into a run, eyes glittering with anticipation, mouth agape.

The envelope lay unopened. She stared at it with dirt smeared hands, opened it with trembling fingers, filled her lungs with air. "My dear Miss Navarre," it began. Her eyes fluttered, and she felt faint. Quickly, she glanced at the signature. "Philip McQuade." She made a mighty effort to slow her breathing, to bring her eyes into clear focus, to steady her hands. She made herself sit, and only then did she begin to read. The note was **short and explicit.**

I am giving a small musicale this Saturday evening, beginning at eight o'clock. Some of my students, and your humble servant, will display their miserable talents. Only a few persons will be present to suffer our musical concerts, but I would deem it an honor were you to find it possible to attend. I await our next meeting with **anticipation.**

He wants to see me! Philip wants to see me!

She was on her feet now, pacing the room, mind reeling excitedly. Saturday. That gave her three days to prepare—and there was so much to do. A dress must be selected and made ready and her hair washed and arranged in a properly modest coiffure. She wanted to look her best for Philip, to impress his friends, to be gracious and charming as befitted a man of such culture. *Philip*, she thought. *Oh, Philip!* A rising peal of laughter—she broke off suddenly, glancing around wildly. This was exactly the sort of thing she mustn't allow, must instead control her impulsiveness, must never give way to her emotions for that way lay disaster and disgrace. She ordered such morbid thoughts away and headed out of the music room for the kitchen. Mary would be a great help and she would want Billy Joe to drive her into St. Agathe

Saturday night, and back again. Oh, there was so much to do. . . .

"Mary!" she called. "Mary . . ."

It was the following afternoon that Emilie decided to ride into town and shop for the items she needed. The lace at the cuffs of the dress she had decided to wear on Saturday night was worn and frayed and had to be replaced, and she needed a pair of short white gloves. She refused Billy Joe's offer to drive her, though she allowed him to hitch the gray mare to the carriage.

It was a delightful ride. Summer had settled over the Delta and all the creatures sought out the shade during the hot hours, but this was a pleasant day and now and then she saw a shadow scurrying through the brush, or heard the rustle of leaves. St. Agathe was quiet when she got there, still as if the townspeople were also trying to stay out of the sun. She made her purchases, adding a few very personal items, then got back on the carriage and headed back for Foxhollow.

It wasn't till she drove past the stables that she remembered Roger Whitman. She recalled how angry he had been that day at Foxhollow and the memory of his threats evoked a strong response in her; she wanted no enemy, wanted only friends, and wondered if perhaps she and Roger Whitman couldn't somehow arrive at some *rapprochement*. She was almost to the edge of town when she turned back and pulled up at the stable. Roger was at work, wearing worn overalls and an old shirt, the sleeves rolled up to reveal his muscular arms as he sought to hammer out a twisted carriage axle. He was unaware of Emilie's presence until she cleared her throat.

He glanced over his shoulder, measured her without a change of expression, returned to his labor. Confusion took hold of her and she wondered what foolhardy impulse had made her come. She ordered herself to leave, but her feet remained rooted to the ground.

"Well, what is it you want repaired, Miss Navard?" His voice was harsh, inflexible.

Her mind raced. "The rear wheels of my carriage. They seem to tremble and grow unsteady. Would you look at them, please?"

He straightened and walked past her without a glance. She followed him back out into the sunlight, watched him as he bent to the carriage. Finally, he turned to her.

"There is nothing wrong with the axle and the wheels are firmly attached. What is it you want here, Miss Navard? There is too much work for me to waste time in idle conversation."

She blushed hotly under his level stare. He had an open face, seemingly frank and honest, the features strong and intelligent, the mouth generous, yet she could not forget that terrible outburst in the library, his vows to take Foxhollow away from her.

"I came to talk to you, Mr. Whitman," she said, in a controlled voice. "To make an effort to be your friend."

A coarse laugh broke out of him. "Very well. Be my friend, Miss Navard. Give me what is rightfully mine. Foxhollow."

"But it isn't yours. My father left it to me."

He snorted, turned away, swung back. "There is no need to travel that worn ground again. I intend to make Foxhollow mine as my mother wished." He spoke in a quiet tone, full of intensity, but with none of the uncontrolled anger he had previously displayed. Yet he was no less forbidding and Emilie could not help but be frightened of him; he seemed fully capable of doing whatever was necessary to achieve his ends.

"Navards have lived at Foxhollow since the early settling of the territory," she said, trying to sound reasonable, "and for you to suddenly appear . . ."

He waved her silent, clamped his eyes shut for a long, disturbing interval. When he looked at her again, his manner had changed, his voice deep, softer, strange. "Miss Navard. Your father's wife was my mother and if we

were not as close as most sons and mothers, I nevertheless felt profound love and respect for the lady. That day at the house, it was as if she were still living, still in those old rooms, still beautiful and full of life, and yet she was dead and I knew a kind of despair that I have never before experienced. It was that alone which caused me to lose my temper and act as rudely as I did. I must assure you that despite my lowly station I am an educated and cultured man fully capable of disciplining my temper. So for that outburst, I beg your forgiveness. . . ."

"Forgiveness easily given, Mr. Whitman, if only . . ."

"As for the rest, I meant what I said and I mean it now. I will have what is rightfully mine and I will do precisely what I must do. As to our being friends, Miss Navard, that is impossible, obviously." He pivoted on his heel and strode away, tossing the final words over his shoulders: "Phillip McQuade is the kind of man you seek and probably deserve . . ."

Many minutes passed before she found the strength to climb back into her carriage and head for home, and when finally the gray moved out it was as if everything was automatic, the beast instinctively homing without human guidance.

A throbbing commenced at the base of Emilie's skull, a throbbing and the residue of terror which Roger Whitman had planted in her fertile imagination. It was as if his calm was even more threatening than his anger had been and she struggled to surmount it, to clear her thoughts. Lose Foxhollow! Roger Whitman made it seem horrifyingly possible. All peace and pleasure drained out of her. It had been Mavis who had caused her to flee to New York, to leave her beloved Foxhollow, and now Mavis' son was threatening to deprive her of it forever. She visualized the two of them, mother and son, and thought there was scant physical resemblance, they seemed so much alike—the same crisp, demanding manner, authoritative, the same intensity, the same mystic appeal that drew people to them, and brought them back.

Emilie remembered clearly how much her father had loved Mavis, almost to the exclusion of everyone else, and this, despite her outward scorn of him. When Mavis would appear, Pierre Navard's attention turned always to her excluding all others. Mavis had stolen her father away and now her son had appeared to complete the task. She felt sick and lost, certain his energy and selfishness would provide him with a victory, for she felt totally inadequate to stand against him.

If only she could find help somewhere, someone she could trust. Mary and Billy Joe? They seemed changed and distant, as if their loyalties had been deposited elsewhere. Phillip McQuade? Dimly she realized that despite her strong emotional interest in him, they were strangers, and she knew very little about him. William Markham? Who could be certain where a lawyer's responsibilities lay: to his client? to the law? to tradition?

When the carriage pulled up in front of the house, alongside the veranda, the mare stopped automatically. Emilie glanced around and it took a long moment before she recognized the familiar surroundings. She climbed down on uncertain legs, shuffled up the steps, across the broad veranda. Her nerve ends seemed to jangle incessantly and she felt trapped and taut, helpless and victimized as life seeped steadily out of her. She glanced up at the sky, deep and pale, broken by a wisp of cloud. The cloud was moving from side to side, spinning now, faster and faster. She turned away and saw the great Georgian pillars that held up the roof tilt and turn and the façade of the house rocked wildly. Everything was in motion spinning at a fantastically swift and blurring pace. A roaring began from far away, the crashing of huge breakers on a rocky coast, the screeching of gulls swooping hungrily, the cries of frightened bathers. It grew louder and as it did the full spectrum of color appeared before her, cracking open, shattering into a million tiny bits and pieces, the hues mixing in wild design, a kaleidescopic maze. It closed in on her and she

felt herself falling, tumbling through a great void, turning in deliberate fashion, limbs askew, dropping forever. Voices—muted and distant, sounded faintly, as if at the end of a symphonic refrain. Then an echo, dim, fading. Then silence. And peace.

At last.

chapter NINE

Emma's eyes fluttered open. From afar, she heard a concerned human buzz and smelled the sweet scent of roses. Her insides were constricted and her initial impulse was to weep. Her eyes moved from side to side as she tried to identify the surroundings. Many long seconds ticked away before she became oriented, this was her own room and she was in the big four-poster. With the draperies drawn, there was only the dim flickering lamps for illumination.

A rapid tattoo beat in the distance. A summer rain pelted the windowpanes. A smile almost came onto her dry lips; the rain would be beneficial for the garden flowers.

She squinted and made out three human forms at the foot of the bed. Who were they? The faces were shadowed and remote and she gave up trying to make them out. Instead, she turned her mind to reconstructing the events that had led to this moment. There was the meeting with Roger Whitman and the carriage ride home. And then the dizziness, even as William Markham had foretold. And then? Nothing. Emptiness. Oblivion. She refused to torture her brain further.

A swift rush of energy, and she tried to sit up. A futile effort, and she fell back, weak, exhausted, anxiety the only constant. One of the figures at the foot of the bed detached itself and came forward, stood gazing down at

her. She stared up into a pair of round-rimmed spectacles. Behind them, two distorted eyes peered at her with steady interest, making her feel like a specimen under a microscope. A pinched nose descended from between those eyes, pointing the way to a small mouth which now opened and gave sound, dragging her back to full consciousness. She struggled to decipher the words. Someone mumbled something rather incoherently. It was herself.

The glasses replied pleasantly. "It is Friday."

Friday. The word seeped into her like water into the parched earth. Friday! But what had happened to Thursday? Where had it gone? Her last memory was of Wednesday. She had lost one entire day of her life, one precious day. Friday. And tomorrow she was to attend Phillip's musicale. Her mind started clouding again and she sensed disaster everywhere.

"Rest," glasses was saying mildly. "Fainted. Too much work, I suppose, too much pressure. And the medication I provided helped keep her asleep for all these hours. Should remain in bed for another twenty-four, but I suppose that's expecting too much . . ."

The voice droned on but Emilie was no longer listening. Stay in bed! Oh, no. There was too much to do—to prepare for Phillip, to make herself beautiful for Phillip.

"Let her eat and rest as she pleases," the voice was saying, "but she must put no undue strain on herself. There is a generally rundown condition and only time and relaxation can eliminate it. . . ."

Emilie recognized the face and the voice. Dr. Herman Phelps. She had not seen him since her father had lain dying of pneumonia and Dr. Phelps had attended him. *There has been little change*, she thought idly, and for some reason that observation pleased her. There was the same pink-pale cast to his cheeks, the same preoccupied expression behind the glasses, the same prim purse to the mouth.

"I'll come visit again next week," Dr. Phelps was saying, as he moved toward the door. "Meanwhile, give her this."

Now the other figures came into sharp detail. Mary and Billy Joe. It was Mary who came shuffling to the side of the bed, her great round form obscuring all else, leaning, voice low and penetrating.

"Miss Emilie, I goin' to fetch some beefbroth. It put some strength back in your bones."

To Emilie, Mary's eyes glittered strangely, as if the servant could see beneath her mistress' skin, able to peer into the dark recesses, to see through to the core of her being and accurately diagnose the future. *Her* future. Emilie shivered and clutched the comforter tight to her throat.

Mary left, Billy Joe trailing behind her, to return minutes later with a bowl of broth and some tea biscuits. She pulled a chair to the bedside, helped Emilie into a sitting position.

"This broth make you feel better."

She began to spoon the hot liquid into Emilie's mouth. It tasted delicious and like some magic elixer returned strength to her limbs almost immediately.

"Mary, did the doctor say anything about me?"

"Just what you hear him say. That you doin' too much, runnin' your poor self down, a-worryin' an' a-frettin' about this place."

"That's *all* he said?"

Emilie probed deep into Mary's eyes, anxious to learn what had occurred during her hiatus from reality. She feared she already knew the answer, at the same time hoping desperately that she was mistaken.

"Mary . . ." she tried mightily to compose her thoughts, to speak clearly, rationally. "Did I act strangely after I fainted? I mean, did I talk in my sleep, or anything else?"

Mary averted her glance. "There was some mumblin'. That's all."

A sigh of relief. Talking only. Many people talked in their sleep and were no less sane than their fellows who dreamed silently.

"What did I say?" A flash of fear passed through her. "No. Never mind. I don't want to know. It doesn't matter." She fell back on the pillow, refusing any more broth, trying to think. A whole day had passed and she had no memory of it, a day that had probably seen her ranting and raving in unconscious madness, even as her mother had, as had so many earlier Navard women. She closed her eyes and in the lidded darkness heard a distant cry. It grew louder. It was the sound of her mother, piercing all doors, piercing the covers drawn over the head of a very young, very frightened Emilie Navard; it was her mother laughing uncontrollably, shrieking wild curses, screaming endlessly. The same terror and near-hysteria she had felt then returned now to embrace her in its icy grasp, and she wore doom like an old familiar cloak. This, then, was the vile taste of it. All else had been only prologue. Now she had been claimed by the true heritage of Foxhollow, the legacy of agony and destruction. A suite of monstrous images raced wildly through her mind–frightened pictures of half-clothed women, shrilling wildly, scampering through long, dark corridors unrestrained. Their mirthless cackling grew louder and louder, careening off the wood panelled walls, echoing hideously, the laughter of madness.

No, no, no!

She covered her eyes with her hands, fighting to block out the horrible visions. They persisted. Then, abruptly, as if some giant switch had been closed, a golden glow of peace and quiet wrapped itself around her and her muscles went slack. New, gentle images appeared and she smiled in greeting. A picture of a garden came into view, her garden, and she was happy. A man walked at her side, a tall, strong man with dark, gentle eyes. It was Phillip McQuade, and he was speaking to her in a soft voice, his words distant and elusive. She strained to catch them. As if the effort was too much, the vision began to fade and

she fought vainly to retain it. Still, it faded, then was gone. Sadness enveloped her once more, then evaporated as she remembered that tomorrow was Saturday. Saturday—she would see him then. And there was so much to do.

Her mind came back to the present and she gazed around the room. The bowl of broth was gone and so was Mary. It took a moment or two for Emilie to remember that she had finished the broth and Mary had announced her imminent return to the kitchen below. An idea drifted ponderously to the forefront of her mind and she swung into a sitting position, feet reaching for her slippers. She stood, wavering on wobbly legs. It was a major physical effort on her part, but she managed to make it to the window.

A feeling of release at the sight of the rain inundating the garden took hold and seemed to stimulate her. Already she was sure the strength was returning to her body. She imagined herself walking down there with Phillip McQuade, taking sidelong glances at his handsome profile, admiring his strong, broad shoulders, listening to his deep rich baritone. Never before had she been so strongly moved by a man, so immensely attracted, so deeply stirred. Yet there was such a tremendous discrepancy between what she felt toward him and what she knew. Who was he, really, and what did she know about him? If only she could be sure of him, trust him, allow herself to depend on him. Clearly, she needed someone, someone whom she cared for and who would care in return. She wanted Phillip to be that person. But was he?

A soft knock came and the door opened. It was Mary. Her face showed alarm at the sight of Emilie on her feet. "You should be lyin' down, Miss Emilie. The doctor, he say . . ."

"Never mind what the doctor says. I'm feeling much stronger, thanks to your broth, Mary. Besides . . ." She smiled confidently, a confidence much shakier than her manner indicated. "Besides, I'm young and healthy and

my powers of recuperation are quite vigorous, thank you."

Mary frowned but said nothing. She was more inclined by everything that had shaped her life not to argue with her mistress, not to overstep the invisible lines that delineated the limits of her freedom.

"Mr. Markham," she said, that great head bobbing gently. "He come by to ask how you feelin'. He downstairs in the drawin' room. He say is there somethin' he can fetch for you from town and he tole me to ask."

How sweet of him, Emilie thought, *typical of his genuine concern and gallantry*. Then, a worrisome thought flashed to mind; learning that she had fainted, had been put to bed, William Markham had wasted little time getting out to Foxhollow. Why? Because of a feeling of friendship and concern for her welfare? Or was it an interest more ominous? Had he come simply to learn if she had already drained her cup of misery to the dregs? She was appalled that such a thought would enter her mind concerning the lawyer and yet she was incapable of turning it out. She braced herself and lifted her chin high. She would display her good health—physical and mental—to the lawyer.

"Mary, tell Mr. Markham that I shall join him in a moment," she said, voice firm.

Mary started to protest, saw the expression on her young mistress' face and, nodding helplessly, left the room. Emilie turned immediately to the wardrobe, trying to decide what to wear. But her strength was less than she had at first believed and she decided not to put too much of a strain on her uncertain flesh. She chose a robe, a modest blue velvet garment that reached to the floor and fastened high about her neck. She brushed her hair swiftly and drew it back in a neat tie, then pinched each cheek twice to bring a flush of color, anxious to impress William Markham with her rapidly improving condition.

She found him pacing worriedly across the length of the drawing room, face rutted and drawn with concern.

His head rose when she entered and there was an expression of alarm in those wise eyes of his, of something much deeper, she was sure, than merely concern for a girl who had fainted. She was determined to allay his fear.

Her head came back as she entered the room and she forced herself to cross the space between them in a few long, vigorous strides, laughing with pleasure as she did.

"Mr. Markham!" she tossed out, making her voice gay and airy. "How nice of you to come! Isn't it silly? You've heard, of course? About my sudden touch of the vapors. I suppose all ladies are subject now and again. Oh, please, Mr. Markham, how stupid of me to keep you standing. Be comfortable, please." She lowered herself onto a gold covered velvet love seat that had been hand-carved a century earlier in the city of Philadelphia, glad to be off her uncertain legs. He sat opposite, eyeing her carefully, not impressed with her surface vibrancy.

"Should you be up and about? The doctor tells me . . ."

She forced a gay laugh between her lips. "Oh, Doctor Phelps! You know as well as I, Mr. Markham, what an old pessimist he is."

William Markham smiled reluctantly. It was true. Phelps saw visions of funeral processions in every pale face, heard death chants in every cough, anticipated mourners with every complaint of pain.

"Still, you did faint."

"True," she said brightly. "And that marks the first time I ever did. Perhaps it may become a habit now and I shall faint again –in another twenty-seven years."

She laughed at her own little joke and he joined in, but with a marked lack of enthusiasm. She decided to press the issue for she wanted not only to reassure him, but herself as well.

"I know what is in your mind," she said coquettishly. "You see in me now the same symptoms shown by my mother before she succumbed . . ."

He stiffened and his eyes grew lidded. His lips pursed as if he were carefully seeking the words he wanted to

voice. "Such was not my thought at all, Emilie. One of the more remarkable aspects of the human condition is people's ability to surmount adversity, to change the course of their lives, to alter their fate."

"You truly believe this?"

"I do, my dear. As a matter of fact, I have been meaning to speak to you about precisely this matter. You brood too much over this family affliction of yours. There is no law of man or of God that makes it mandatory for each Navard female to fall victim to it. You must cleanse your mind of such morbid thoughts and go about the details of your life."

"You think I might be spared?"

He leaned forward, took her hand in his. "You must live life as best you can, as must we all. There are no promises, no guarantees, no patterns of happiness, except those we create for ourselves. Go out and meet whatever it is life holds, my child, for surely if you sit around and wait, events will pass you by and you will find little joy in melancholy solitude."

"Oh, I'm so glad you said that. You see, I am trying. But I have never been an outgoing person and it has always been hard for me to push myself on others."

"But that is not necessary. You are charming, a delight to have around and welcome by everyone."

"I wish I could believe that!"

He laughed briefly. "Apparently Mr. Phillip McQuade shares my view."

She blushed and lowered her gaze. "He is a very pleasing young man."

That drew another chuckle. "I had occasion to speak with him only this afternoon and he informed that you had consented to attend his musicale tomorrow evening."

"Oh, yes."

"Will you be up to the strain?"

"There will be no strain, Mr. Markham," she said with forced lightness. A slight headiness had come upon her and she wanted very much to return to her bed, to sleep, but there had been an important reason for coming down,

for talking to the lawyer. What was it? Oh, what was wrong with her memory? So often lately it failed her, thoughts eluding her grasp like small boys playing hide-and-seek. Ah, there it was . . .

"Mr. Markham," she said with elaborate casualness that deceived him not at all. "How well do you know Phillip McQuade?"

"Well enough," he gave back. "We met when he first came to town. Because of his interest in the law, he visited my office, to introduce himself, pay his respects."

"And you liked him?"

"Don't you?" He laughed as color flooded her cheeks. "Yes, Emilie, my dear, I liked him very much. Still do. His charm is difficult to resist and he has a fine mind and a quick wit."

"I agree."

"I thought you might," he replied drily.

"Could you tell me something more about him? I know so little and . . ." She hesitated, decided to plunge ahead. "And I feel so much."

His smile was pure pleasure. "That is good to hear, Emilie, for I believe you could not have chosen more wisely. Phillip is a supremely eligible young man. As a music teacher, he cannot, of course, become wealthy. But since he was able to make an offer to purchase Foxhollow, I assume he has a substantial amount of money. Perhaps an inheritance or money he earned in his earlier years at the law. In any case, he is a fine fellow, lively and compassionate, a man of integrity and purpose." He stood up. "Is that what you wanted to know, Emilie?"

She gazed up at him, unable to match the lightness of his tone, but grateful for what he had said. She felt better now about Phillip, at responding to him so swiftly. A girl alone could not be too cautious, for she knew that the world was populated by many unscrupulous men who would play the most unscrupulous games in order to win a property with the value of Foxhollow. A vision of Roger Whitman sprang to mind, surely he would stoop to any depths to gain his selfish ends.

"Thank you, Mr. Markham." A pleased laugh burst out of her, a rising peal, and she tried to keep it from becoming too shrill, not to allow William Markham to learn how unsteady she really was. This exchange had made her feel good, good to be able to share an intimacy with another human being, good to have someone to turn to for advice, good to know that her strong affirmative reaction to Phillip McQuade was supported by William Markham's judgement. A burst of affection for the elderly lawyer surged through her and she almost embraced him. But he was moving toward the door in that stiff, proud way he had, muttering something about other affairs to attend to, other clients to visit. His manner, the erect stature, the sense of self, of a man in his own time and his own place, was faintly reminiscent to Emilie. She plumbed her mind trying to identify the memory.

It came to her with a startling and somewhat unnerving suddenness—Roger Whitman! There was that same proud tilt to his chin, the same tight high thrust of shoulder, the same controlled manner of moving, the same certainty of voice. Her hand went out as if to detain the lawyer and she almost told him of her encounter with Roger at the stable, of his continued hostility, and his renewed threat to take Foxhollow from her. But no words came, and the fear that skipped along her nerves turned her blood cold.

"Mr. Markham . . ."

He turned expectantly. "Yes, my dear."

She gave a girlish toss to her head and arranged a small smile on her mouth, but there was a dull pained look in her eyes. "Thank you for coming."

"My pleasure, Emilie. Be kind to yourself, my child. Life is too brief for it to be otherwise. It is a lesson we all learn. Enjoy yourself tomorrow evening."

"I will," she murmured, and again after he had left the drawing room, after she heard the front door close behind him. "I *will*." But the certainty of the words far exceeded her inner surety and she could not help but view the future with troubled and jaundiced eyes. She

made a powerful effort to wash away spreading gloom and think only of pleasant matters. *Be kind to yourself*, he had said, and she intended to try. She was entitled to some kindness, to a degree of consideration, to affection and the rewards of the world.

If only they would come without effort, without pain and struggle. A chill wind seemed to pass through the big house and she hugged herself against its bite. She started up the stairs to her room. There was so much to do and so little time remaining.

chapter TEN

Emilie's eyes popped open and she sprang up into a sitting position. This was the day, and all her senses were alerted. This was Saturday—the day she was going to see Phillip McQuade. An old superstition, something Mary had taught her years earlier when she was very young came to her mind—*Saturday is the day of fate.*

Perhaps the ancient belief of the slave quarters was true, for this day did have a special significance. Perhaps seeing Phillip McQuade again would have a profound influence on her future. But there was no time for such idle speculation; she had too much to do.

Immediately after breakfast—she ate heartily for she meant to maintain a high energy level for the rest of the day—she set about selecting the gown she would wear. With Mary at her shoulder for advice and assistance, Emilie turned to the huge wardrobe containing Mavis' dresses, for there would be no time now to have a dressmaker design something specially for her. And all at once she was delighted at the prospect of wearing a dress Mavis had worn, hoping vaguely that some of Mavis' fire and magnetism would remain in those dresses, would pass into her.

A blood-red chiffon was too vivid, too startling. The green velvet, too seductive. The black silk, too formal. She wanted something light and gay, youthful, yet suitable to her form and face and coloring, as well as the occasion. Finally, she settled upon a blue and white taf-

feta Empire gown. She held it against her and whirled to face Mary.

"Shall I wear this dress, Mary?"

"That's the one, Miss Emilie. It make you the prettiest lady in these parts."

Emilie laughed happily and wasted no time trying on the dress. It was a perfect fit. She whirled to see herself in the mirror and an eerie sensation gripped her. Had her hair been darker, it could well have been Mavis staring back at her out of that glass. A shudder went through her. *Mavis.* If only she, Emilie, were truly as beautiful, as bright and witty, as confident. Oddly, just knowing the dress had encased Mavis as now it did herself, Emilie felt a twinge of unaccustomed daring invade her heart. She puffed up the balloon sleeves and smiled at her reflection. How odd that she should actually enjoy wearing what had once belonged to Mavis!

Then there was no more time for idle reflection. The gown had to be carefully ironed, each fold precisely pressed, and petticoats chosen, and slippers cleaned. And her toilet would take hours. The day passed quickly, full and exciting, with no opportunities for anticipatory concern. Then suddenly, it was time to go.

The carriage ride was a nerve-wracking experience for Emilie, not because anything untoward occurred, but because now her fertile imagination, with nothing to occupy it, could roam ahead, wondering whether Phillip would approve of how she looked, whether or not she would be clever and attractive enough to please his friends, not to embarrass him. She was unaware of the route Billy Joe took to St. Agathe, unaware of the plum-purple dusk seeping into night, of the varied hues that painted the peaceful landscape in colors that would satisfy the demanding eye of an artist. Instead, she sat stiffly trying to maintain her calm, to keep her mind free of the fears that seemed these days to inhabit it almost constantly, to prepare herself emotionally for the evening that lay ahead, an evening that might well prove to be the most important of her life.

Billy Joe drove carefully, keeping the mare going at a smooth canter that covered the distance swiftly. Along the way they passed other carriages and Billy Joe tipped his tall black hat, a weathered relic of many years service, and Emilie nodded automatically, as was the custom. Presently they were passing through the town itself, heading for Phillip McQuade's house on the north side. Minutes later, the carriage jiggled to a stop and Billy Joe climbed down, opened the door, swung out the steps and helped Emilie to descend. His white teeth gleamed against his ancient face, a broad smile of approval.

"Miss Emilie," he murmured, "you sure do look fine this evenin'."

"Thank you, Billy Joe."

She looked searchingly past him at Phillip McQuade's house. It was a large building, larger than she would have supposed he needed or would want, with an extended wing having been attached in recent years. The house was painted a deep, dull red and trimmed with black, all very masculine and right for Phillip, she noted. From the new wing, she heard the buzz of voices and realized that Phillip must have built the wing himself, to use as a studio, a very necessary adjunct for a musician to have.

Taking a deep breath, hoping the queasiness in her middle would leave, she moved up the gravel path to the panelled door. The knocker was huge and of glittering brass; she struck it twice. From inside she heard footsteps and the door swung open and Phillip stood there looking handsomer than ever in a beautifully tailored full-dress suit.

His hands reached for hers, drew her inside, and his smile of welcome was open and warm. She couldn't help but smile back at him.

"How good of you to come, Miss Navard."

"I have been anticipating this evening since your generous note arrived, Mr. McQuade."

"Phillip," he corrected once again.

"And if you would, call me Emilie. . . ."

"It shall be my pleasure." He helped her off with her

wrap, handed it to a servant who, she supposed, had been employed for the evening. "Word reached me, only today, Emilie, that you were ill, and I feared you might not be able to join us tonight."

A shiver of guilt stabbed into her vitals. He mustn't be allowed to think of her as sickly or weak. "It was nothing," she said quickly. "A passing thing." There were many women who, it seemed, were always complaining of this bodily displeasure or that one, and more than anything, she wanted Phillip to consider her a whole and healthy creature, bursting with life. His smile reassured her.

"Of course. You are the very epitome of good health." He laughed, that rich, penetrating sound, and she felt herself respond. "You beautify my house by your presence," he went on, leading her toward his studio. They moved along a wide passageway with a low ceiling, the walls lined with bookshelves and literally hundreds of volumes. She was certain that Phillip had read all of them. Her eye was caught by one gilt-inscribed book, *Wuthering Heights*. Her favorite novel! She smiled secretly. How nice that he had read it, found the same pleasure in those pages that she had found. One day soon they must talk about the book. She was anxious to learn if he had felt the same desperation and despair as she had when Heathcliff threw himself into Catherine's grave?

A sidelong glance. Phillip's profile, classic and aggressive, was set, the mouth determined, eyes peering straight ahead. He was a man who knew where he was going and what he wanted. A litany of questions filled her mind; there was so much about him she wanted to know, but this was hardly the time for such talk. He was opening the double doors at the end of the passageway, ushering her into his studio.

The music room was large and high ceilinged, designed for his work. A grand piano occupied one corner of a raised platform at the far end of the chamber, and on it instruments. In front of them, chairs and sofas had been arranged to provide comfortable and advantageous seat-

ing for Phillip's guests. There must have been thirty or more people in the room, the women beautifully gowned, the men handsome and formal in their tails and ruffled shirts.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Phillip said. "Allow me to present Miss Emilie Navard, to those of you who may not know her, mistress of Foxhollow, recently come back to grace St. Agathe by her presence."

Emilie blushed and muttered something that no one heard and was glad when Phillip led her to a small sofa. She sat and was surprised to see that he still stood.

"I will introduce the evening's activities now, Emilie," he said quietly, "and of course I will be at the piano. I hope you won't mind sitting alone."

She was disappointed, but concealed it. "I shall listen closely to you, Phillip."

"Not too closely, I hope, for I fear I am less than the most accomplished pianist."

Three quick strides put him on the platform and the assemblage swiftly grew attentive. "Tonight," he began, "the first part of our program honors the time of the year. From Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, we shall play *The Spring*, concerto number one in E major, and *The Summer*, concerto number two in G minor, allegro non molto. Then, following a short intermission, I shall endeavor to render Beethoven's concerto number four in G major for piano. And now we begin."

The music filled every corner of the studio and Emilie gave herself to the fine sound, allowing it to envelop her. She was dimly aware of the musicians at their work, having eyes only for Phillip. Before long she had lost all sense of time and place and was transported by the music. Then all at once the Vivaldi was finished and there was an outburst of enthusiastic applause. Emilie joined in. She hoped that Phillip would spend the short intermission with her, but it was not to be. No sooner had he stepped away from his piano, than he was surrounded by his guests—females mostly, who chattered gaily and offered their complimentary comments.

Emilie remained in her seat, trying to appear relaxed and comfortable, a hesitant suggestion of a smile on her mouth, eyes darting here and there, hoping Phillip would soon come to her. Before that could happen, the intermission had ended and it was time for the second half of the musicale to begin.

Phillip played beautifully. He showed an understanding of Beethoven, a fine and delicate touch, a balance and a restraint that proved him to be a fine musician. The rich sound washed over Emilie like a warm soothing bath. Too soon it was over and Emilie joined in the applause, standing, waiting for Phillip.

She saw that he had moved off to where his musicians were gathering their instruments and scores, was shaking the hand of each in turn, his manner sincere and outgoing as he expressed his appreciation for their efforts. His consideration and directness touched Emilie and pleased her and provided an even higher estimation of Phillip McQuade.

As she watched him, a gradual awareness of the other guests broke through her. People were engaged with each other, talking, gesturing, discussing the music or other matters of mutual concern. Phillip's manservant passed among them with champagne for the men and a pink punch for the ladies. Somehow he managed to pass Emilie without pausing. All at once she felt alone and out of place. No one addressed her and she spoke to no one, a stranger, a foreigner in her own land. She arranged her features in an expression of controlled remoteness that concealed effectively the tremor of uncertainty that gripped her middle and made herself concentrate only on Philip. Everything would once again be all right, if only he would come to her, take her hand, smile and talk to her. It was with relief that she saw him at last turn from his musicians and stride purposefully in her direction. She moved instinctively to meet him. How handsome he was, how cool and poised, a man for all occasions.

"Emilie," he began. "Forgive me for neglecting you."

"You have your duties . . ."

"My duty to you transcends all else. No, not duty, my desire, for I do indeed desire to spend a great deal of time with you. Your presence inspired me tonight."

"You played beautifully."

"If it pleased you, I'm glad."

"Oh, it did. I loved your playing, Phillip."

Emilie was aware of an unsteady flutter in her stomach as she spoke his name. It would take some getting used to, she supposed. *He* would take some getting used to, for he was a magnetic man with a powerfully charged personality. He was speaking and she struggled to hear only his words, but the level of conversation in the room intruded, made her nerves draw tight, made her feel like a small, frightened girl. She wished she were better able to conduct herself among groups of people. She wished she had the aplomb and verve other girls her aged possessed. She longed to meet new people, but didn't know where to begin to know them, or how. Always she seemed to say the wrong things, her conversation awkward and forced.

"Oh, Phillip," she interrupted abruptly, "isn't there someplace quiet, some place where he could be alone, talk without people crowding in on us?"

He never hesitated. His strong hand came to rest on her elbow and he guided her out of the studio, through another room, his study, obviously. Then they were moving through French doors out into the small garden to where a wrought iron bench painted white stood beneath a giant oak dripping with Spanish moss. They sat down. He turned so that he was facing her, expression concerned, interested, waiting for her obvious unrest to fade away. When he spoke, it was in a soft and sympathetic voice.

"Emilie, what is troubling you?"

She hesitated, about to brush away his concern with a light phrase or two. But in that second she realized that she wanted him to know how she felt, how deeply disturbed she had been for fear that she was trodding the same path of insanity travelled by her mother, she

wanted his understanding, his strength to lean on, his affection. Breathing became difficult for her.

"I have no right to impose."

"But you have every right. I give you the right."

Her eyes ranged over his smooth dark face, seeking some small sign that would fasten her lips, but she found only sympathetic interest and concern, only the wish to provide her with a haven, a port in the storm.

"Oh, Phillip, I am so frightened . . ."

It came gushing out of her then, the history of the Navard Curse, her father's marriage to Mavis and his death, the reason she had gone to New York City to live, and her return, and the events of the last few days. She finished breathlessly and he looked at her expectantly, as if it was a story only half told. It was then she realized that she had screened her words, measured the emphasis given to each bit of information, so as not to stress her fear of succumbing to the family affliction and in so doing had watered it down to where it sounded trivial and ordinary.

"Is that all?" he said mildly.

"It sounds silly, I suppose."

"Nothing you do or say sounds silly to me. You have been under pressure and that has tired you out, physically and emotionally. And Roger Whitman has been no help. If you will permit me, Emilie, I shall speak to him, make known in forcible terms that you do not wish him bothering you. . . ."

She gasped. "I want no trouble, Phillip."

"He'll cause neither of us trouble. Leave it to me."

"Whatever you say." A new sense of peace descended over her and she made no effort to resist it. This was what she had always wanted and needed, someone of strength and firmness to take control, to handle those matters that were beyond her capacity. Phillip was ideal for the job.

She raised her eyes to his and their faces were only inches apart. It was like looking into swirling dark pools for her, pools ever changing, hypnotic. She was almost

unaware of his arms encircling her waist, easing her closer to him. She felt his warm breath on her cheek, smelled the strong masculine scent of him, instinctively lifted her mouth to his. His lips were soft but firm, expertly disciplined on her own innocent mouth and a burst of sensation took hold of her and lifted her and swung her about, a feather in a whirlpool of hot air. Her eyes closed and her brain tumbled wildly, spinning in a crazy vortex that drew her deeper until she lost all sense of being, of everything but Phillip's embrace and of his strength and his longing. Weak and trembling, she gazed blankly at him when he finally pulled back.

"Emilie," she heard him say, as if from afar. "Nothing evil will ever happen to you. Nothing. I will see to that."

She wanted to believe, wanted to trust, wanted to expose her vulnerability to him completely.

"There is so much I would say to you, Emilie," he was murmuring against her cheek. "So many words to express how I feel. But it is so soon, too soon, I want you to know me better and to understand me, to be sure of yourself. When you are sure, I will speak."

"Oh, Phillip. . . ."

His finger across his lips silenced her. "Let me decide when the time is right." He straightened, held her at arm's length. "Now, there is something I want you to know, to hear from me rather than from some gossiping stranger."

Trepidation spread out from the base of her spine along the complex of nerves until each area of her body felt sensitized. She wanted to close her ears to what he was about to tell her and at the same time craved hearing it. She forced her eyes to hold onto his and waited.

"I was with Mavis the night she died."

The words slammed her with the force of bullets. *Mavis and Phillip!* She knew Mavis had been his pupil—but this! The thought of the two of them together—of their being close, of spending time together, of meaningful exchanges, loosed a spasm of jealousy in Emilie. She made a powerful effort to conceal her emotions.

Suspicion tinged the jealousy. If Phillip had been with Mavis on that last horrible night, why had no one ever spoken of it to her? Was it possible that no one had known of his presence? Surely Mary and Billy Joe must have seen him. Bitterness clouded her mind. It was as if secret forces were at work, aimed at shaking the structure of her life, of pulling it from under her without warning. If Mary and Billy Joe had known about Mavis and Phillip why had they never told her so? Was it possible they hadn't known, that Mavis and Phillip met in secrecy? She felt tortured, put upon, as if there were no friends to rely on, no allies, no one to trust.

Phillip took her hand in his, spoke quietly. "Would you like to know exactly what happened?"

What a fool she was! He was telling her. Now. At a time of his own choosing, which was as it should be. He had owed her no obligation to speak earlier. And now a new fear invaded her heart; perhaps the truth would be too painful. She stiffened, but said nothing, for she knew that she would not, could not, stop him. *She had to know.*

"As I told you, I used to visit Mavis a great deal," he began. "I guess it was a mutual love of music that cemented our friendship. Mavis could be charming and quite entertaining when the mood was upon her, and in a small town like St. Agathe that can be a blessing."

Of course, Emilie thought. A man like Phillip, cultured, worldly, sophisticated; he would require a variety of friends, persons of different intellectual capacities and interests, of different emotional intensities.

"In some remote way, I feel responsible for Mavis' death." His words chilled her and she held herself very still, very quiet, waiting for him to continue. "You know, of course, that she drank. Quite heavily, I'm afraid. I had tried frequently to turn her away from alcohol, but with no success, and there lies my failure. If only I had tried harder she might still be alive today."

Relief was like a cool breeze on a hot summer day. A small smile turned her mouth. "There is only so much help one person can give another."

He nodded absently, went on with his tale. "On the night she died, we had dinner together. For some obscure reason, Mavis was drinking more than usual. We had a violent quarrel. . . ."

Emilie could not restrain herself. "A *vialent* quarrel?"

He shrugged. "No . . . not violent. That may be too strong. Let's say that Mavis was more angry than I had ever seen her. Someone had done something to annoy her, to frustrate her aims, and she was ruthless in her criticism and condemnation of this person."

"Who was it?"

"I don't know. She never mentioned anyone by name. In any case, I tried to calm her, but it was no use. She turned her wrath toward me and finally, I fear, I lost my temper and bitter words passed between us. Add to this Mavis' annoyance because she desired more attention than I was prepared to give, and she was not averse to letting me know. There was no reasoning with her and so I left. I never saw her again."

"Phillip, what about Mary and Billy Joe? Didn't they see. . . ?"

He faced her squarely, expression open, without guile. "Mavis had given them strict instructions that they were never to gossip about her or her visitors upon fear of swift and relentless punishment. She meant it and they were not about to challenge her authority."

"But with her dead . . ."

"I spoke to them, asked them to say nothing of my visits for fear that they would be misunderstood. A teacher of music cannot risk the soiling of his reputation in any way. Mavis and I were merely friends, but could I convince people of that? I think not, and so silence seemed advisable."

He lowered his head and there was no mistaking the expression of anguish he wore. He fought for breath as if he had just gone through an extended period of violent physical exertion, acute tension. And tension was precisely what it was, Emilie thought. Knowing the folk ways by which people in this part of the country lived,

Emilie realized that Phillip had placed his future squarely in her hands, for to reveal what he had told her would surely blacken his reputation, cause distrust and the end of his professional and social acceptance in St. Agathe. Compassion for this fine man was strong in her and she yearned very much to help him, to soothe his battered spirit. How difficult it must have been for him, a man frank and honest, to conceal even an innocent portion of his life. And it all had been so innocent, so pure, so proper. Her eyes glowed with warmth as she realized that never again would she have to be concerned about his relationship with Mavis. She wanted to comfort him, to ease his torment to make him laugh, and a flood of affection, filled her middle.

"It is over, Phillip."

He shook his head as if trying to clear it. "No, Emilie. If I had remained with Mavis I might have saved her. If only I could have seen what was coming . . ."

"No one can anticipate what another person is going to do, Phillip. You gave Mavis your friendship and that is the most valuable possession people have."

He gazed into her eyes for a long interval and finally she was forced to avert her gaze, a lightness swirling around her brain, her insides in turmoil. She was the victim of emotions and desires she neither fully understood nor could identify. She had spent too much time alone, she knew it, too much time away from young women and young men, too much time without establishing close and meaningful relationships. Now, Phillip. And she felt, oh, how much she felt, until she was sure she must explode from the gathering forces beneath her skin. It took a mighty effort of will for Emilie to force herself erect, to announce that it was time for her to depart.

"Must you?" he said.

"There will be other times, if you want them."

He moved closer to her at that, towering and broad, almost overwhelming. His arms reached round her and drew her against him and a flash-flood of warmth filled

the hollows and crevices of her being. His strength was, at one time, threatening and reassuring, offering a secure berth, a place of safety and peace.

"Soon, Emilie," he murmured, removing his lips from hers. "Soon, we shall see each other again."

"Yes, Phillip," she managed, in a small voice.

The carriage ride back to Foxhollow was a time for reflection, to try to understand what was happening and what she truly felt. Her innate shyness, her self-esteem supported on an unsteady foundation and her lack of experience all caused her thinking to be muddled and left her with a litany of questions for which she was unable to find answers. *Why*, she plagued herself, *couldn't life be simple, uncluttered, peaceful?* And in her heart Emilie knew that for her there would be no peace.

chapter ELEVEN

Nothing was the same. Life had changed for the better now. Her daily routine seemed exciting and blissful. Each day was different, heightened by Phillip's attention, his consideration, by his very presence in the same world, and by the meaningful reminders of his affection which arrived whenever he could not. This time it was twelve red roses, and a card inscribed in his flowing script.

"To us, with deep concern. Phillip"

Elated, Emilie put the note down and nestled her face into the sweet soft blooms, allowing their scent to fill her senses. Dear Phillip. Always thoughtful, always kind. Still, a lingering reluctance remained in her mind. There was an inability to commit herself to him, to anyone, she supposed, for Phillip was the kind of man any young woman could desire fully.

Then Mary was there, interrupting her ruminations. "You got a visitor, Miss Emilie. It's Mr. Markham."

Emilie brightened. "Oh, yes. Show him in, please." She hadn't seen the elderly lawyer for a long time, weeks it seemed, and it would be pleasant to gaze upon that fine aristocratic face again.

He came marching into the drawing room in his accustomed erect, almost military manner, his slimness accentuated by his still high, square shoulders and the forward thrust of his jaw. He offered a sweeping bow,

by way of greeting, a throwback to that more gracious era to which he owed so much.

"Emilie, how kind of you to receive me."

"How good of you to visit. I've been remiss of late, ignoring my dearest friends. Are you well, Mr. Markham?"

"Never better." He settled into a chair opposite her. "I bring regards from Miss Nancy Dunkirk who I chanced upon this morning."

"Oh, dear. I have neglected Nancy these last weeks, I fear."

"I'm sure she will understand. After all, you two have been close since childhood." A twinkle came into his eyes. "I suspect all of us understand." He laughed with genuine pleasure.

She clapped her hands together impulsively. "Oh, dear, Mr. Markham, life is lovely and there are times when I believe I shall burst with the goodness of it all."

"It is good to see you in such high spirits, a change for the better. And what has brought about this transformation?" Again that mischievous twinkle.

Just then Mary returned, with tea and cakes. She placed the tray on the small drop-leaf table and withdrew. Emilie poured. William Markham sipped and indicated that the brew was to his liking, brisk and hot.

"However, you still haven't answered my question. Perhaps I can supply the answer, in only two short words—Phillip McQuade." He smiled at her startled expression. "There are no secrets for long around St. Agathe, my dear. Living out here on the Delta has many advantages but a high degree of privacy is not numbered among them. Yes, Emilie, I know that Phillip has been courting you since I introduced you."

"Do you . . . do you approve?"

"Is it my place to approve or disapprove?"

She wet her lips. "I would like your approval and your respect. You were not only my father's lawyer, Mr. Markham, but his friend and I would like to think that you are my friend also."

"You can depend on that, my child."

"About Phillip, then?"

"I hold him in high esteem."

She sighed. "Oh, I do care for him, so very much. He's so handsome, so fine, so highly cultured and intelligent. What he could possibly see in me . . ." She let it hang.

William Markham put aside his cup. "You are a remarkably appealing young woman, Emilie, sensitive and charming, and any man not entirely removed from his senses would woo you with great diligence."

She blushed and giggled. "Phillip told me about himself, about Mavis, I mean. That they were friends. Could they have been more. . . ?"

He interrupted. "I think not. Mavis was hardly the sort of woman a gentleman like Phillip McQuade would become involved with. She was demanding and of bad temper, more wildcat than female, and her weakness would be sufficient to drive away any man of sensitivity." He paused thoughtfully. "And yet, I wonder if perhaps I ascribe more to Phillip than is his due? In truth, how well do any of us here in St. Agathe know him. . . ?"

A frightened look came into Emilie's eyes. This is what disturbed her, that so little was known of Phillip's past, the details of his youth, the things he had done, the people he had known, the philosophies by which he lived. Yet she could not deny the powerful attraction he held for her and her growing response. Frequently, when they were together, Emilie found herself becoming ill-at-ease as he attended her queries evasively, his answers oblique, clouded. Perhaps she had allowed her emotions to lead her too far and too fast. Perhaps she should see less of Phillip until she learned more about him. She glanced up to see William Markham gazing at her appraisingly. It was as if he had plumbed her most secret thoughts.

"Emilie, you must now allow the conservative turn of mind of an old man to corrupt the spontaneity of your feelings. I am certain Phillip is an upstanding young man with fewer faults than most of us. He is forthright and

sincere and is welcome in my house whenever he wishes to call. I am sure that you could not find a better man anywhere in the county." He laughed shortly. "After all, my dear, not everyone is fortunate enough to be native to these parts."

Emilie breathed easier and relief tugged at the corners of her shapely mouth. She felt more confident now, calmer and better equipped for whatever lay ahead, and able to accept Phillip's attentions openly, without reservation. Then William Markham spoke and his words brought back all the old uncertainty.

"You should be married, Emilie."

Marriage! That was so total, the ultimate, a commitment for all of time. Was she ready for that? Did she really want to be married, to Phillip, to anyone?

"Marriage would be an ideal condition for you, Emilie. It would, I am certain, ease the tensions which so often plague you, and would make you know your proper place, the place where you could function fully. You and Phillip," he said softly. "That is a match that would surely have pleased your father. Phillip would go well here at Foxhollow and it would be good for you to have a man around the place to help you with the work. Besides, it is not fit for a woman to live alone for too long."

Emilie could not get his words out of her mind during the days that followed and she recognized their validity. Yet there were doubts that could not be washed away, doubts that persisted until she wished she could turn off her thought processes as one might turn down a gaslight. She told herself that she thought too much, worried too much, to her own detriment. Then, that Sunday afternoon, following her return from church, Phillip came calling. Emilie had been expecting him and was in her room changing into a wispy pink lace dress with bonnet to match when Mary announced his arrival. Excitement permeated her spirit and her hands fluttered to her throat.

"Oh, Mary, do I look all right?"

"You look just fine, Miss Emilie, these days. This gentleman's good fer you, I say."

Emilie reached for Mary's hand, gripped it tightly. "Mary, I'm so confused, frightened sometimes, afraid I'll make some terrible mistake, ruin my life . . ."

The servant drew Emilie close, embraced her. "Miss Emilie, I been here since 'fore you was born and watched you grow and you dear to me, no matter what."

"Oh, Mary, there have been times I thought something was wrong, that you had turned against me, that you feared what had happened to my mother was happening to me. . . ."

"Hush, now. Mary ain' about to turn against you, child, not now, not ever. Oney, things happen and folks git older and change, git scared mostly, I reckon. But that ain't got nothin' to do with you and that gentleman waitin' downstairs. He a real fine lookin' man, that one, and you don't have nothin' to be feared of with him around."

"Oh, Mary, you and Billy Joe and Foxhollow are all that are left of my childhood, of those good years."

Mary smiled, released her mistress and assumed her usually aloof expression. "You good, Miss Emilie, and deservin' of the best. And now, your gentleman friend, he is waitin'."

Emilie straightened up and glanced at her image in the mirror, fingers dancing lightly over her soft brown hair. "Tell Mr. McQuade that I shall join him presently, Mary. As soon as I am ready."

Phillip looked handsomer than ever in an exquisitely tailored gray coat and trousers and a matching tall hat. She felt her heart literally skip a beat as he took her hands and drew her to him, kissing her on the mouth briefly.

"Emilie I want to talk to you. Perhaps we could walk down by the river. It will be cooler and . . ."

At that moment, she knew with a startling clarity what he was going to say, going to ask her, as if it had

all happened once before, in some earlier incarnation. Surprisingly, she felt only slightly nervous, and her comparative tranquility pleased her and gave her a new sense of her own strength.

Hands clasped, they strolled out into the garden and beyond, toward the Mississippi. They walked easily under the hot, westering sun, not speaking, until they came to the narrow path along the bank. They followed it until it climbed to a grassy hillock shaded by a huge willow tree. Phillip whipped off his coat and spread it on the thick green carpet and Emilie arranged herself on it modestly. From where they sat, they watched the slow waters of the river slide lazily past. Above, river gulls wheeled about in great circles and the occasional throaty croaking of a bull frog was in counterpoint to the chirping of crickets.

"It is so lovely here," Emilie said.

"It is you who are lovely, Emilie."

His voice was a caress and she turned her face to him, wanting to speak but unable to do so. Her throat was dry and her tongue felt swollen.

"Since first we met, Emilie," he was saying, "since first I came to Foxhollow and saw you that day with Mr. Markham and Roger Whitman . . ."

A sharp pang of apprehension went slicing through her at the mention of that name—Roger Whitman. It conjured up chill images of disaster in her mind and she felt threatened by his very existence in the same world in which she lived. She fought back the tenseness that lodged in her chest and ordered her mind to concentrate only on Phillip's presence and on Phillip's words.

"I have felt admiration for you," he was saying. "And it was not long before that admiration was transfigured into affection and that affection into something stronger, much stronger." He paused and in that brief interval her heart began to leap wildly beneath her breast. Why did he hesitate? Had he reconsidered? Had she done something wrong? Perhaps by her silence, her studied calm, she had offended him, led him to believe that she felt

nothing for him, that his romantic hopes were doomed to be dashed on the rocks of disinterest. Her hand went to her mouth.

"Oh, Phillip, I . . ."

"Please," he said softly. "Let me say what must be said." He gazed out at the wide expanse of lazy water and she followed his eye. A gull, spying a prospective meal beneath the surface had launched into a long, graceful dive. A splash, a watery flapping of wings, and the gull was again airborn, beak empty. Emilie was glad. One life had been spared. "Emilie," Phillip said. "Perhaps I have been less than proper and fulfilling a suitor than I might have been, but my resources of time and energy and funds are limited and there are obligations, to my work, mostly, to my students, my music . . ."

"I understand."

"I have longed to place myself fully at your disposal but the doubts in my mind have restrained any expressions of ardor . . ."

"Phillip, you needn't . . ."

"Explain? Indeed I must. I wish to lay bare my soul before you. My position, a music teacher in a small town with only the narrowest of horizons—I have so little to offer. There will never be wealth or grandeur of living. I can make no promise of a lush and gratifying life. You, on the other hand, own a fine and distinguished name, a great planation, a lovely old house. I have nothing to offer but myself."

"How much that is, Phillip."

He lifted her hand to his lips, kissed the soft flesh of her palm in a gentle, lingering expression of affection. His eyes rose to hers and held, warm and luminous, much feeling and promise.

"Emilie," he murmured. "I love you dearly. Have loved you, my darling, for the longest time. I do not even now dare to hope that you might return my love and yet I am compelled to speak. If I offend you, dismiss me, send me away, but that will change nothing, for I shall always love you."

She felt tears in her eyes and her voice caught in her throat. "Oh, my dearest. To hear those words from you fills me with joy. Not return your love? That would be impossible. I return your love again and again with such depth of emotion that I fear I must surely drown in it. I love you, Phillip McQuade, and will for all time."

His kiss was gentle, warm. His mouth skillfully pliant on her own and she felt shivers of delight and anticipation. A trembling gripped her limbs and she knew that had they not been seated she would surely have fallen. His hand at the small of her back was strong and certain and the closeness of him, the masculine scent of him in her nostrils, loosed mists swirling through the hollows of her being. She felt a strange dizziness, confusion. She was helpless in his arms, and a complete victim of his overpowering presence.

"Oh, Phillip," she said against his cheek. "I love you more than I can express. Anything you want of me . . ."

He pulled back to face her, solemn, eyes steady. "There is something I want."

A cold finger probed deeply and panic spread out from its icy tip. "Yes, Phillip."

"I want you to become my wife, Emilie. To marry me. Will you do me that honor?"

It broke out of her then, all the welled-up emotion, all the gathered tension, spewing out of that single secret place where fears and hopes are stored, and dreams and desires and apprehensions. All thoughts of danger, of disaster, were wiped aside and she could consider only the bliss of this moment.

chapter TWELVE

The mist was snow white and swirling as Emilie floated along. It was foaming higher around her skirts. It became difficult to move as the vapors thickened and grew murkier, and soon her feet dragged and a weariness encased her extremities. As if motivated by some tormenting wind, the mist plumed into separate pristine cones and Emilie felt free and light and was able to skip gaily between them. Her feet barely touched the dustless, sun-drenched road as she hurried toward an infinite, cloudless horizon. Birds sang and she wondered where they nested and, as if in answer to their songs, her head went back, face aglow, mouth gaping with silent laughter.

The road was gone and she moved now in great, slow, high leaps, bounding from rock to slippery rock in a turbulent black sea. A splash of phosphorescent foam dampened her face and her spirit. There was danger everywhere in the cold dank air. Huge gulls wheeled and dived, cawing voraciously. One swooped across her shoulder, its wing feathers brushing her cheek like the kiss of death itself. She screamed, silently, and threw up an arm in defense.

The sea disappeared. And the gulls. And the rocks. All was motionless, threateningly quiet in a moist, sickly green jungle of impossible density. A serpent, grotesque and with deathhead markings, slithered out of the slime

—coiled, head swaying, tongue flicking mockingly. She fled in terror. Trees flashed past and the vines reached out to ensnare her. She tripped and went sprawling and from nowhere swarmed an army of hideous red ants to crawl onto her flesh. Shrieking, she struggled erect and ran.

Time was measured not in minutes or hours, but in terror and the pounding of her heart. From behind she heard a weird, terrifying, shrilling sound, almost laughter, as if the sinister chase provided pleasure for her pursuer. Footsteps came crashing closer and she strained to move faster. Her breathing was labored and her flesh without strength. A cry of anguish broke across her lips, but there was no one to hear and the sound was lost even to her own ears.

The jungle was gone. The footsteps were gone. The terror was gone. Ahead stretched a long and peaceful path shaded by stately oak trees on either side. Her pace slowed and she moved easily, pleased by the tranquility that surrounded her, by the sweet perfume that filled the air from flowers unseen. Each tree was familiar, an old friend, reassuring, solid. All at once the trees were gone and only the Spanish moss, long and limp and pale like the beards of old men waiting to die, remained, horrifyingly blank.

Her scream was a rising wail of anguish. She screamed again and again and again. For in the place of the trees now stood an endless row of men in dark clothes. Black from boot to hat, each carrying in his right hand a coiled black snake whip. And where the faces of the men should have been was only a blank, featureless, formless, blob. A rasping dryness came into her throat and she tried to run, but her feet remained fixed. And now the faceless men shuffled toward her, surrounded her, an ominous taunting shrill of spiteful laughter drifting out of them. She felt herself falling. One of the men, faceless, yet frighteningly familiar, tall, ominously powerful, grasped her roughly by the shoulders, hauled her erect. Out of him, out of that featureless, immobile, sickly white blob, came

a cackle, tinny and flat, a coldly hot recitation, the echo of agony and disaster, complete, absolute, ultimate.

The Curse.
The Curse and worse.
The worst Curse to have and hold.
To have and hold and never grow old.
Never grow old but cursed in time.
Cursed in time till there is no time.
No time, and beyond, and beyond . . .

The circle of black figures crowded closer, arms flailing like branches in the wind, beating at her, driving her into the ground until purple dusk came on and the breath was forced out of her body.

She woke, gasping for air, fighting panic and the naked terror of the dream. The horrow clung to her like lichen to rocks and though fully awake she could not rid herself of an intuitive sense of disaster. What had the nightmare meant? Who was the man that cursed her? Of course. Roger Whitman. No other wished her ill. A cold chill made her shiver. She had to rid herself of such thoughts, had to be free of them, of anything that might shake the happiness she had known of late. As Phillip's wife, life would be rich and sweet and safe, safe even from the heritage that had been handed down through generations of Navard women. To allow a bad dream to upset her now was more than stupid—it was cowardly, self-defeating. She became impatient, ordered herself to live only in reality.

And yet, the dream possessed a reality of its own. It was more than an omen. It seemed to be telling her something, alerting her, warning her. But to what? Then the door swung open and Mary was there, disapproval on her round face.

"Miss Emilie, how come you not up and dressed yet? You know you got a train to catch. And Miss Nancy Dunkirk is already downstairs waitin' fer you."

Emilie gasped and swung out of bed. She had forgotten. This was the day she and Nancy were going to Memphis to purchase her wedding dress and other things for a trousseau.

"Tell Miss Dunkirk I'll be down in a minute. If she wants some coffee and breakfast . . ."

"Whut kind of a person you think Mary Johnson is, Miss Emilie? I already served Miss Nancy coffee an' rolls."

Emilie laughed and began to get ready. A thought struck her. "Mary, do you believe in dreams? I mean, *really* believe, not some old voodoo nonsense."

Mary's eyes rolled heavenward. "Dreams is true, Miss Emilie."

"How true?"

"True as true is." Mary shook her great head. "But you go to git movin', Miss Emilie. This is no time fer dream talk. You ain't got time fer dreamin' over dreams, good or bad. . . ." She started out the door, then turned back. "Be all right if'n I send the carpenters up now?"

"What carpenters?"

"Mr. Phillip's carpenters. He done sent 'em over to fix up the room fer hisself, your daddy's ol' room."

Emilie struggled to keep her face from breaking open, concealing her surprise, her shock, her dismay. Phillip had never mentioned a desire to keep a separate room. Her mind reached back to when Mavis had been alive and had made her father sleep in different quarters. Was this the kind of life she was to have? Married and yet apart. A sense of resentment, deprivation dug at the core of her; a husband's place was with his wife, at her side, day and night. The old haunting loneliness returned. Marriage, it seemed, was not to change this. Gradually she became aware of a new emotion, a feeling of indignation. Why should Phillip desire separate rooms? Resentment turned to anger and stirred her vitals. This was a matter that would have to be resolved before she left for Memphis.

"Mary. Tell Billy Joe I want him to ride to St. Agathe, to Mr. Phillip's house. I *must* see him at once. Tell him this is an emergency."

Emilie was aware of her swiftly ballooning hysteria, aware that all joy had drained out of her, to be replaced by fear and uncertainty. She wanted to scream and cry, to hide in some shadowed niche, to feel properly sorry for herself. *No*, she commanded. Self pity was not suitable. Not now. She fought for control, found it, set her fine chin at a defiant angle. Surely there must be some reasonable explanation for what Phillip was doing, for what seemed to her like a cruel affront. To panic now, to send for him as if she were a panic-stricken schoolgirl with no inner resources, would indeed be stupid and self-defeating. Phillip would explain when the time was right.

"Never mind, Mary. I changed my mind about sending for Mr. Phillip. Tell Miss Nancy that I'll be down shortly."

When Emilie, dressed for travelling and with a smile fixed on her piquant face, approached the drawing room where Nancy Dunkirk waited, she was surprised to hear a male voice through the door.

She entered and William Markham rose to greet her.

"How nice of you to visit me, Mr. Markham," she began.

He bowed in that courtly manner of his. "Emilie, you look absolutely radiant."

"As befits a bride-to-be," Nancy chimed in. She was a tall, attractive woman of Emilie's generation, with golden hair and a leisurely manner. She and Emilie had been girls together and had resumed their friendship as if no gap in their relationship had ever existed.

"Nancy, all this must be an awful bore for you."

Nancy laughed. "My dear, a trip to Memphis will be an adventure for a stodgy married lady like myself. And your wedding is the most exciting social event we've had in St. Agathe in years. What a prize you've won in Phillip McQuade!"

"I think so, too," Emilie giggled. She turned apologetically to William Markham. "Forgive me, please. This girl talk is so silly, I know."

"Not at all. In fact, it is the wedding that has brought me. As you asked me to do, I've drawn up a list of people to be invited to the wedding and the reception. Before I send out the invitations, I thought you might like to study the list. Perhaps there are changes . . ."

"Oh, no, please, Mr. Markham. I trust your judgement implicitly."

He nodded. "Very well. There is one more thing. . . . May I see you alone for a moment, Emilie?"

Nancy headed for the door, smiling graciously. "When you're ready, Emilie. I'll be outside."

As soon as the door closed behind Nancy, William Markham strode across the room to where a large red velvet box lay on the table. Cradling it tenderly, he brought it to Emilie, extended it.

She took it uncertainly, aware of the profound expression of affection in his eyes. "I don't understand," she said.

He sighed and a small smile lifted the corners of his mouth. "Beautiful things belong to life, Emilie, to the living, and to allow the past to deprive the present is merely the pride and arrogant sentimentality of an old man. What is in this box was the nuptial gown worn by my bride, LuAnn, at our wedding. It would honor her memory if you would wear it at yours."

Emilie felt her features go slack with emotion and she fought back the tears. "You loved her very much," she said. "Are you sure you want me to wear this dress?"

"Entirely certain. And I want you to keep it, preserve it and pass it on to your daughter when she marries, and her daughter after that. Thus will LuAnn always remain with life."

She kissed him swiftly, overwhelmed by the gesture, fully aware of what this meant to him. Slowly, caressingly almost, she lifted the velvet cover of the box. There,

tenderly wrapped in tissue, lay LuAnn Markham's wedding gown. Emilie's hands trembled as she lifted what seemed to be yards and yards of pristine white Chantilly lace, a deep sigh escaping her. She clutched the gown to her bosom. "You have made me very happy."

"I hope it will fit," he said, clearing his throat.

"Oh, it will. I know it."

"Now," he said. "You have a train to catch and I have detained you long enough. I will attend to the invitations, you may be assured."

It was with relief and a heightened sense of happiness that Emilie left Foxhollow that morning with Nancy, heading for the train depot. William Markham's gift had put everything right with the world.

The train for Memphis had not yet arrived, and after sending Billy Joe back to Foxhollow, they stood beneath the overhang of the station out of the hot sun, chattering about what lay ahead. Neither of them saw Phillip McQuade pull up in his carriage, or dismount, stride athletically toward them. One moment they were alone, engrossed in their conversation, and the next he was there, towering over them, handsome, sartorially correct.

"Oh, Phillip!" Emilie was startled and felt her expression change quickly from excited animation to swift apprehension and finally to delight at the sight of her fiancé. "What are you doing here, darling?"

"I've come to see you off and look at your lovely face once more."

She blushed, laughted a little too loudly. "But I'll only be gone for three days, four at the most."

"Too many. Too many for us to be apart. I intend for this to be the final separation in our lives. Always we shall remain close together."

"Perhaps," Nancy said diplomatically, "I should inquire about the train's arrival. I will return presently."

They barely noticed her departure.

"I have a surprise for you," Phillip said.

"Oh, what is it?"

"Guess." It was almost a command and a pang of resentment flared in her breast, quickly extinguished.

"Oh, I'm not good at guessing, Phillip."

"About our honeymoon. I've been doing some thinking, planning, and I've decided."

Again the resentment, now lingering like a searing flame, at the pronouncement, the *fait accompli*, the decision reached and made. Honeymoons were planned by two people. And to consider places to visit, to weigh the advantages of one over another, would have provided pleasure. She should have been consulted, she told herself, and even as the thought crossed her mind, guilt doused the pang of resentment, guilt that she failed to believe in his selectivity, in his taste, his wisdom. Surely he had gone to the trouble of considering the honeymoon, of making a decision, only out of consideration for her and the demands on her time and energy, relieving her of another burden of the many she alone could carry during this period. She smiled up into his handsomeness.

"What have you decided, darling?"

"New Orleans."

"Oh, Phillip, how wonderful! My favorite city in all the world."

She hugged him impulsively, broke away, glancing around surreptitiously, hoping no one had observed that unseemly display of affection. He was talking about New Orleans, about the historic and glamorous points of interest, about the fine restaurants, about the endless delights the Crescent City held for the perceptive and discerning visitor.

"I will show you New Orleans as you have never seen it."

"I was there once, for a day only, and then I was quite young."

How long they talked she never knew, but Nancy appeared and in the distance could be heard the whistle of the Memphis train. Soon it would be chugging into the

depot. A worriesome thought fluttered across her mind. The room, the other bedroom. Why must they have separate bedrooms? Why must they live apart and why hadn't he told her of his plans?

"There is something I must know, Phillip," she heard herself saying, the words sounding strange and distant in her ears.

"Yes, my dear?"

She had second thoughts. This was childish and unreasonable. Many married people maintained separate bedrooms, providing each with the high degree of privacy so important to sensitive people. And Phillip was indeed a sensitive man. A musician. An artist. There would inevitably be occasions when he needed to be alone, to think, to compose his ideas, to read, to create his music. How stupid and selfish and inconsiderate of her to believe that simply because they would be married she was entitled to all of his attention all of the time. He was a man who lived a great deal inside himself and would need a place where he could be alone. Besides, the room was not far away, only a few steps, steps she was young enough and strong enough to manage, if he wanted her.

"What is it you were going to say, Emilie?"

"Nothing, my dear. Nothing at all." She shrugged the question away, pushed all doubts aside, and smiled at him, held onto his arm as they moved toward the train which had ground into the station, stood steaming and waiting for passengers to board. Nancy had already climbed on and now Emilie offered Phillip her cheek and he kissed it, murmured a swift farewell.

"Hurry back to me, my darling."

"As soon as I can."

Moments later, she was settled back in the compartment with Nancy, glad to be on her way, glad to be away from Phillip. . . . *Away from Phillip?* The thought unsettled her and she thrust it out of her mind, telling herself that she was the most fortunate of women to have found such a man as Phillip McQuade for a husband—

handsome and strong, intelligent, talented, kind, considerate . . .

"He will make you a wonderful husband," Nancy said. "You must be very happy."

"Yes," Emilie said, and tried very hard to believe it.

chapter THIRTEEN

Something old,
Something new,
Something borrowed,
Something . . .

It was with horror that Emilie remembered that she had worn nothing blue on this most important day of her life. She stiffened in the carriage seat alongside William Markham and fought to soothe her agitated nerves. It was a silly superstition, nothing more, and the happiness that was to be hers would come from Phillip, and from herself.

But there was no stilling her wildly thumping heart. And the thick ponderous heat closed in and a thin layer of moisture collected on her lip. She felt lightheaded, empty, and the sound of the sea was in her earts. She never noticed when they went clattering into St. Agathe, down the main street toward the church where a crowd of people had assembled outside. She heard their expressions of approval as William Markham helped her out of the carriage, guided her into a room at the back of the chapel to where Nancy Dunkirk, as matron-of-honor, was waiting.

The minutes, alternately slow and swift, passed. And Emilie struggled against the hysteria that choked her. Words were spoken and she heard none of them, not

even those that sounded on her own lips, and kisses were exchanged, but she felt nothing. Finally time ran out. The first notes of the organ. The wedding march. A door swung open like a gaping wound and Emilie moved woodenly through it and into the church.

She shuffled on trembling limbs along the aisle, face turned straight-on, eyes darting uncontrollably, registering snatches of sight, faces, colors, expressions. At first glance she didn't believe the evidence of her eyes and they fluttered, rolled, went back to the same place. There *he* was, in the second pew, hair thick and blond, tumbling over his brow, too handsome, too indolent of stance, mouth smirking, staring, coldly, threateningly—Roger Whitman. She stumbled, caught herself, went on. Why was he there? He was no friend of hers and surely not of Phillip's. Yet he had dared to come, to present himself at her wedding, an expression of his unbelievable gall. She was past him now, standing next to Phillip at the altar. The minister was moving in front of them. A heaving colorless mist descended over her eyes, and she saw nothing more.

Through the obscuring haze, Emilie barely heard the minister's voice drone the words she had waited so long to hear, the words that would make her and Phillip one, would alter her life for always. Instead, she stood still and rigid, as if mesmerized, a vision of Roger Whitman's ice blue eyes filling her brain, excluding all else. Later, much later, she would try to recall at what exact moment in the ceremony Phillip had placed the neat gold band on the third finger of her left hand, but when it happened she felt nothing. And her two-word response to the minister asking that vital question was reflexive.

"I do," she murmured, almost inaudibly.

Phillip's lips touched hers and she was, legally and publicly, Mrs. Phillip McQuade. Side-by-side, her arm linked through his, they moved back down the aisle, and this time the mist cleared slightly, but she managed not to look at Roger Whitman's forbidding presence. There was no excluding from her consciousness, however, the

threats he had mouthed. And in that micro-second of time which should have been for her the apogee of happiness, Emilie knew with a cold surety that she was in great and mortal danger. And tailing close behind was the memory that she had ignored tradition, neglected to wear something blue!

Then they were outside the church and people were laughing and calling out good wishes and throwing rice and the excitement and high spirits pierced through to Emilie and she turned all morbid thoughts away and took pleasure in the experience. The carriage ride back to Foxhollow, where the reception was to take place, seemed all too brief, filled as it was with the ecstacy of Phillip's strong arms around her and his hot lips upon her own, his love filling her with a never-before-known sense of her womanhood.

Once back at the house, they had only a few moments alone and Emilie told Phillip that she had neglected to wear something blue, and even as she did she wished she had been able to hold back the words, put the empty superstition out of her mind. He laughed at her.

"If a little bit of blue is to determine our luck, my dear, we will have a marked absence of it I fear. You leave your luck to me. I will guarantee it."

It was then that the first of the guests came clattering up in their carriages, laughing and talking loudly. Before long Foxhollow echoed to the sound of levity and the clinking of champagne glasses. Emilie, flushed and lovely, found herself surrounded by old friends and neighborhoods, people who had known her as a child, who had watched her grow, people who understood her and her place on this land. A glow of excited pleasure emanated from her as she passed from group to group, person to person, accepting their fond wishes, giggling at their small jokes, entertaining their recollections of her mother, her father. That was a sobering thought. If only Pierre Navard could have lived to see this happy day, how proud he would have been, how glad for her and for the family now to be infused with vibrant new blood,

the fine qualities of her new husband. But these were only transient thoughts and not to be lingered on as she flitted about absorbing the atmosphere of gaiety that filled the big old house.

Abruptly, painfully almost, the way the stem of a plant is sliced away from the root, her joy was truncated. She had been giggling, sharing some tiny wickedness of Nancy Dunkirk's, along with a quarter of other young ladies, when, looming over their heads, far across the width of the domed reception hall she spied that now familiar blond cap of hair, that arrogant assemblage of handsome features, the tight challenge of that cynical grin. *Roger Whitman had dared come to her reception.* A visceral hollowness claimed her and she waved, fought the lightness that drifted into the space behind her eyes.

"Emilie," Nancy said with concern. "Are you all right?"

"I'll be fine," she murmured, eyes scanning the press of people until she located William Markham in earnest conversation with two other gentlemen. She pushed through to him, brushing past those who would have talked to her, drawing him to one side anxiously. She fought to keep her expression unworried her voice soft and calm but it was no use and it sounded shrill and uncontrolled in her own ears.

"Roger Whitman!" she burst out. "He is here! Please ask him to leave. He has no right . . ."

Her face was pale and there were lines of vexation at the corners of her mouth. One hand fluttered at the base of her smooth white throat

The lawyer frowned "I can't do that Emilie."

"Why not? He is no friend of mine, nor of Phillip's, and his presence is unwanted, unwelcome. He is my declared enemy and would steal Foxhollow from me, rob me of what is mine by birth. I did not invite him."

"But I did," William Markham said quietly.

"You had no right!" she broke out. "You know that I . . ."

His expression firmed up and he took her wrist in his

slender hand and his grip was strong, insistent. She stilled her voice. There was a fixed smile on William Markham's mouth that belied the intensity of his words.

"You must calm yourself. This is your wedding day and you must act accordingly. *I* invited Roger Whitman. *I* take the responsibility for that since the matter of extending invitations was placed in my hands. Placed there by yourself." The heat washed out of her face and her eyes turned down. "This matter is not worthy of so heightened an emotional state, Emilie. Perhaps inviting Roger was an error of judgement on my part, but it was an honest one. He is, after all, a member of this small community of ours, and to omit him would have been a pointed slight clear to everyone. Besides, he can do you no harm here, among all your friends. . . ."

She knew that he was right. Not to have invited Roger would have been a grievous social error, yet his presence was offensive to her, frightening, and she felt threatened simply by his nearness. She made him out to be an insensitive man, crude and dangerous, and was certain he intended to cause trouble in any way he could.

"Now you stop worrying needlessly," William Markham was saying. "Enjoy this day, Emilie. You will never have another one like it."

Yes, she thought. *And stop allowing your mercurial emotions to continually betray you, to control your actions, to reveal how easily distraught you become, how unstable.*

Unstable! That was the key word, and that more than anything is what she had to battle against. Stability. Balance. Tranquility. Control. These were the qualities she needed, craved, *must* have, else she was treading a sure downhill path to disaster. A vision of her mother, face distorted, a wild shriek coming from her gaping red mouth, faded quickly onto the screen of her mind. *Stability, that was the important quality.* She forced the awful picture away and placed a disciplined smile on her lips.

"You're so right, dear Mr. Markham," she murmured. "Please forgive my outburst."

He chuckled softly and released his grip. "Of course, my dear. A day like this. All the excitement. I understand."

He patted her cheek affectionately and moved off, lost in the surging crowd. Emilie watched him go, then turned, anxious to find Phillip. A large figure blocked her path and she knew immediately who it was.

"Congratulations, Mrs. McQuade." To Emilie, the edge she detected in Roger Whitman's voice was clearly sarcastic and insulting. He toasted her with his champagne, drank, and grinned that crooked grin of his. "There is no person here who would not say that you have made yourself a fine marriage, Mrs. McQuade. Phillip McQuade's highly desirable, a fine catch, you might say."

"I will accept your best wishes, Mr. Whitman," she made herself say in a flat voice, its steadiness belying the swift beating of her heart.

He inclined his head—an ironic bow? The grin still sliced across his mouth. "And you have them, madame. I am certain that Mr. McQuade will make your life an experience to be remembered for all time."

She scanned his face for some hidden meaning, drew herself erect. "I expect to be very happy, Mr. Whitman. Now if you'll excuse me . . ."

He gestured and she pulled back, as if he had been about to strike her. The grin widened. "What a fearful creature you are! Do you face all of life with such trepidation? Does tomorrow frighten you and the day after? Well, perhaps the music of Phillip McQuade will soothe your fears, temper your hysteria . . ."

"You!" she gasped. "How dare you speak so to me? You threaten me and seek to intrude on my life, to take away what is mine. What an uncaring brute you are, lacking all sensitivity, else would you be here now, celebrating my wedding as if we were friends."

"Perhaps we could be friends. . . ." The grin held what—challenge?—threat?—disaster? She had no answer.

"I hate you for being here," she burst out. "For trying to destroy my wedding day."

"You don't understand . . ."

"I understand quite well, sir. It is my happiness that provokes you, causes you dismay and creates envy in your miserable spirit. Phillip McQuade loves me and I love him and together we shall build a meaningful life here at Foxhollow. Well, you shall cause me no further distress, for if you do I shall inform my husband and he will thrash you, Mr. Whitman, or worse. I warn you, Phillip is no man to be trifled with."

"I agree with that estimate and . . ."

"No! I will hear no more from you. You are to leave Foxhollow and never return."

She whirled and pushed her way through that mass of humanity, afraid that she might swoon, that her knees might refuse to support her, that she might burst into tears at any moment. People called her name, offered their felicitations, but she paid no heed. It was Phillip she wanted, Phillip's presence and his strength, his love. She found him at the foot of the grand staircase, laughing heartily, and she hurried toward him, toward her husband, toward the man she loved, toward the man she trusted and respected, the man who would take care of her always. She had no doubts about that.

None at all.

chapter FOURTEEN

THE DREAM.

The same horrible dream, the same extended line of faceless men in somber garments, arms flailing. Deliberately, they shuffled toward her, legs stiff, bodies rigid, encircling her, cutting off all escape. Out of this sinister company, one figure came closer, reached for her, cold fingers digging into her shoulder, shaking her violently, repeating the morbid rhyme she now knew by heart. She wanted to cry out, to run and hide, but she did nothing, small, whimpering sounds were all that came out of her. The faceless creatures closed in, arms flapping like bats' wings, mouths gaping, sounding an eerie screech that grew more intensely penetrating, a mournful wail that rose in pitch until her ears ached from it and her hands flew protectively to shield them.

Emilie woke with a start. Over the roar of the train she could still hear the dying wail of the engine's whistle. It was only a dream, she assured herself. A meaningless dream. But it took many minutes before she was able to calm her nerves. *If only*, she thought unhappily, *the dream would sometimes alter itself, become less constant in its horror and the doom it foretold. But always it was the same. In every chilling detail.*

She made a major effort to exclude all depressing thoughts from her mind and concentrate instead on Phillip and the fact that she was now his wife. What a fine

life they would have! His music career would blossom and he would, in time, turn seriously to composition. There was no doubt in her mind that one day he would become famous, renowned throughout the world, his music acclaimed. She considered the gratification to be found in such success and from being married to such a man, as well as being mistress of Foxhollow, and a mother. A mother! The anticipation loosed a shiver of delight. Oh, yes, she wanted children. Many of them and she vowed to turn Foxhollow into a fine place for them to grow up. Such projections made the remainder of the journey pass swiftly and soon they were climbing down out of the train in the New Orleans' depot.

Phillip had arranged to have their luggage forwarded to the LeRoi Guest House, where they had reservations. This done, he turned to Emilie.

"Come, my dear," he said briskly. "Let us engage a carriage and be on our way."

The idea came suddenly and delighted her with its unorthodoxy. "Oh, Phillip, mightn't we walk, so that I can see New Orleans leisurely right from the beginning? I would enjoy that so much!"

He considered the request, shrugged, and agreed. "This is rather unusual, I must point out." There was a mild hint of criticism in his voice. "Ladies do not walk about generally."

"Oh, but it's so exciting!"

"Excitement, Emilie? Surely as mistress of Foxhollow, as Mrs. Phillip McQuade, you are beyond such trivialities, such emotional unsteadiness. Still, I will indulge you this time, my dear, but I would prefer that you control such impulses in the future."

His words disturbed her, but she was too stimulated by the history of New Orleans and its romantic reputation to be long depressed. She remembered that it was here that Cavalier de la Salle planted the banner of his sovereign to claim this territory for France, it was here that the pirate LaFitte sold his ill-gotten gains and delighted the ladies of the city, it was here that Andrew

Jackson defeated the British Army; it was here, at the mouth of the Mississippi, that the produce of the American heartland was transshipped to the ports of Europe; and it was here that so much culture and beauty was imported from foreign shores.

Her enthusiasm was infectious and soon Phillip was again his charming and gracious self, and as they strolled he pointed out buildings of particular beauty or interest, historical landmarks. Pedestrian traffic was a potpourri of color, of faces and forms never before seen, ranging from rugged and bearded sailors to exquisitely groomed gentlemen. Carriages rolling by often contained beautiful women gowned in the most recent fashions from Paris.

It was overwhelming, and Emilie loved every second of it. Her every sense was tuned to the heartbeat of the city and she found it almost impossible to contain her excitement. She was enchanted by the pink and white buildings, by the wrought iron lacework gracing the galleries, by the shuttered windows and doors. And the people! Somehow they looked different than any people she had seen before, be it in St. Agathe or New York City. The men, at least those of her own class, all were lean and dark-visaged, intensely handsome in some exotic way, daring in the manner in which they moved and looked, as if directly descended from those early pirates.

"Creoles," Phillip was saying, "is what the French or Spanish descendants of the original settlers are called. The first French settlers were the dregs of the Paris streets, Emilie. The fools came here expecting to find gold lying on the ground and discovered instead only a wilderness populated by savage Red Indians."

"What were their women like?"

He measured her before he replied. "Also of the streets. But the settlers were lonely and married them anyway as soon as they set foot to land. So you can see that all natives of New Orleans are in fact of the progeny of . . ."

"I understand," she said quickly, not wishing to hear more.

She drank in the sights. The narrow streets with their picturesque names—Rampart, Canal, Bourbon, Royal, Basin. And the sounds: the cries of the street hawkers peddling fresh fruit, fish, pralines, the tinkling of pianos, here a voice raised in song, there the laughter of a girl behind closed shutters, the animated conversation of two sailors.

Emilie stopped dead. Ahead, out of a narrow alley, came a strange procession. First, a horse-drawn flat-bed wagon on which rested a plain pine box—a coffin. Next, a cluster of people, Negroes, garbed for mourning, their dark clothes shabby and worn, but clean, the men wearing derbies or top hats, the women carrying parasols. Last, another flat-bed wagon drawn by a spavined horse. On this wagon stood half a dozen men, musicians, busy attending their instruments out of which came music like nothing Emilie had ever before heard, not sad or mournful as seemed to fit the occasion.

There was a wildness to the sounds they produced, an insistent, free tempo, a darkly soaring echo of another time and another place, yet surely belonging here, the drumbeat rolling insistently, the trombone a low sweet wail, the bass fiddle plucked in tonic chords, the cornet a rising approbation of life. Emilie felt deep pleasure at what she heard and a smile turned her mouth and her foot tapped in time to the music.

"Stop that, Emilie, at once!" Phillip's voice was hot and thin.

"What's wrong?"

"Don't you realize what you are seeing?" His eyes flashed icily. "This is a funeral."

"I know that, darling. But, the music . . ."

"Yes," he hissed. "That music. That primitive corruption, that savage mélange of sound—*jazz* . . ."

"It pleases my ear, Phillip," she replied in a conciliatory tone.

"I suggest you cease being pleased by it, then. More than primitive, it is a disgrace, a debasement of that which

it has taken civilized human beings a thousand years to refine."

"But Phillip, you . . ."

"You have my thoughts on the matter, Emilie. There is no reason to pursue this subject further. I find it distasteful."

A high impenetrable wall was erected between them. Phillip stepped to the curb and waved at an oncoming carriage. It stopped and they climbed in and a moment later they were clattering toward the LeRoi Guest House.

During the ride Emilie tried to calm her unsteady nerves. This was the first bad moment they had had, their first quarrel, she supposed. And yet was her pleasure at the sound of the funeral music—jazz, he had called it—was that a misdemeanor of such proportions as to warrant the anger he had displayed? She thought not. It would take time for them to understand each other fully, she knew, time to recognize each other's moods and tastes and to learn how not to give offense to them. She made an effort then to smile at her new husband, to speak gaily to him, and he, happily, responded in kind, and soon the incident was almost forgotten.

But her next encounter with Phillip's temperament was to occur only hours later. They had unpacked and were settled in their room at the LeRoi Guest House. After a short rest, they were readying themselves for dinner. Phillip was already dressed and prepared to go, while she still fussed, trying to decide which piece of jewelry looked best with the green brocade gown she was wearing. He glanced at the gold pocket watch she had given him for a wedding gift, a watch that had been her father's, had been in her family for generations. It was past eight o'clock.

"Emilie," He made her name sound like a rebuke. "It is getting late and my hunger is insistent."

"I want to be sure, Phillip. Which brooch do you prefer?"

She saw the tautness of his expression reflected in the glass and she felt a sudden chill, as if in some way she

had been diminished, her spirit shrinking, becoming meaner.

"I'll only be a minute, dear," she said softly.

"Not a minute, Emilie. *Now!* You must learn punctuality. You must learn responsibility to me and my desires. You must learn to so organize your time that you finish what must be done in proper order. I am ready to go to dinner."

She laid her jewelry aside. "Please, don't be angry with me, Phillip."

The curve of his lips might have been termed a smile, but it lacked all warmth or humor. "Angry? I am not angry, Emilie, merely disappointed. After all, you are no child whom I must discipline, nor is that my function. Besides, do you feel as though you have erred?"

"Perhaps I should have been ready sooner . . . Phillip, I want so much to please you, to make you a good wife."

"As you shall, I am certain, given enough time."

"But you seem to disapprove . . ."

"Nonsense. You're imagining things. I merely point out the pattern of my own life. Now shall we go to dinner?"

Galatoire's! There was magic in the old name and Emilie approached the fine restaurant with heightened excitement. They rode by carriage up Royal Street, turning into Bienville, left on Bourbon, and there it was —Galatoire's. She entered holding proudly to Phillip's arm, eyes drinking in the decor, the handsomely garbed diners. This was another world, muted, gracious, the trained staff hovering about, anxious to serve and to please. The *maitre d'* ushered them to a table.

"Does this location please you?" Phillip said to Emilie.

"Oh, yes!" She smiled briefly at the *maitre d'* who drew out her chair so that she might be seated. With smooth efficiency, a veritable army of men descended upon them, placing elegant platters and crystal before them, pouring water, extending menus, suggesting the specialties of the house, wines, Emilie felt overwhelmed.

"I'll order for us both," Phillip said.

"Oh, please," she said. "Let me choose for myself. It will be such fun."

"As you wish." His tone was reserved, remote, and he turned to his own menu.

Her eyes roamed swiftly over the huge selection, rejecting and accepting, making mental note of possibilities. At last she decided, and gave her order.

First, *pate la maison*, light to the palate and served with tiny chunks of marinated potato, a new taste treat. Next, a deliciously spiced onion soup, delicate, aromatic, typically French. Each sip was an adventure and she shared her joy with Phillip. Expectantly, she waited for the entree, averted her eyes as the waiter carefully placed the platter in front of her. She glanced down.

Something was wrong.

She reached back in her memory. What *had* she ordered. A flash of nervousness took hold and her fingers grew tense and cold. A quick glance revealed Phillip engrossed in his own dinner.

"Phillip."

He looked up, face flat, expressionless. "Yes, my dear?"

"There has been a mistake."

"Oh!"

"I think I ordered the Brook Trout *Amandine*. This is Sole *Muniere* that they brought."

"A mistake at Galatoire's!" His brows rose. "I think not, Emilie. You have forgotten what you ordered."

"I-I'm sure."

He put his fork down carefully and turned to her. "Are you really certain? Think for a moment. Had you not insisted on ordering yourself, had you allowed me to choose for you, and assume the rightful responsibilities of a husband, this might not have happened." A patient sigh passed his handsome mouth. "Very well. I will summon the waiter and correct the error."

"Oh, no. Wait." Her mind raced wildly. Had she ordered the Trout, or only *thought* she did? She wasn't sure and that indecisiveness troubled her.

"You did want the Trout?"

"I . . . yes, but . . ."

"But what, Emilie?"

"Perhaps I spoke unclearly. Perhaps it was my fault."

"I shouldn't be surprised. These waiters are trained for efficiency. They listen to what they are told. I have dined here many times and never known such an error to occur. Well, you shall have your Trout."

"Oh, no." All at once she felt as if every eye in the place was turned to her, mocking her, aware of her inability to act as a mature married woman should act. "Oh, no. I remember now. It was the Sole that I want, that I ordered."

He retrieved his fork. "Of course. And it is done very well here."

"I'm sorry if I embarrassed you, Phillip," she said after a while.

His glance was level, the dark eyes unblinking. "Embarrass! Why Emilie, you could do nothing to embarrass me. You are my wife."

The words should have reassured her, reaffirmed her position, but such was not the case. She lost her taste for the food and ate with an assumed zest, hesitant to disturb Phillip in any small way. As for him, he soon fell into a carefree, happy mood reminiscent of his demeanor during their courtship. His manner was light and gay, his wit sharp and entertaining, and before long she had regained her high spirits.

After dinner, Phillip leaned toward her confidentially, suggested a stroll through the narrow streets of the French Quarter. "All sorts of people live here and you may find it to your interest."

She agreed reluctantly, anxious not to repeat the unhappy experience of that afternoon. But afraid to offend him, of giving him cause to be annoyed with her, she consented.

The streets, only dimly illuminated by gaslight, were crowded and Emilie wished she felt less threatened by every shadow, by the dark alleys that stretched out on either side like avenues leading to the Devil's lair, by the

sudden bursts of laughter from behind louvered doors, by the single scream that rent the night air, ending in a blubbering plea, then silence. She looked around. No one seemed alarmed, least of all, Phillip.

An increasing sense of impending ill-fortune pressed down on her and she craved the safety and quiet of their room at the guest house. She turned to Phillip and as she did someone brushed against her and her purse seemed to be torn off her wrist. A compulsive cry of alarm broke out of her.

A man, stocky and ill-kempt, in the striped jersey of an intinerant sailor, stooped and retrieved her purse, handed it over with an exaggerated flourish.

"Beggin' your pardon, lady. An accident, I'm sure." He grinned and there was a gap where two front teeth were missing. She smelled his breath, sour with stale alcohol. He staggered off and she swung back to Phillip.

"Oh, please, darling, let's go back to the room. I suddenly hate this place."

"Hate! Isn't that too strong a word. This is your honeymoon Emilie, and I am your husband. Surely you are not tiring of my company already."

"Oh, Phillip, no. But this place and these people. The crowds. I fear I may faint."

"Very well. But your unstable attitude distresses me. A marriage cannot be built on such an unsteady base."

His words and their import terrified her but she was incapable of dealing with them at that moment. Her mind raced swiftly and her emotions churned as she felt herself to be the focal point of a threatening world, of dangers seeking her out, wanting only to destroy her, to deprive her of all well-being, of her sanity. She suppressed a despairing moan behind tightly clenched lips. Was this the Navard legacy she was fated to receive? Could she find no escape from it even in this gay city among strangers and while on the arm of the man she had married, the man who loved her and had sworn to

cherish and protect her? Perhaps there was no protection, no safeguards, no force powerful enough to shield her from the danger of her own blood.

They turned into Canal Street, broad and open, and here there were fewer people, and those were more fashionably turned out, strolling more leisurely, window shopping, talking easily, life expending itself in a more civilized fashion. It was then that her eyes fastened on the classically shaped golden head, the familiar profile, the angled mouth. She gasped and refused to believe. Her eyes swung away, then returned. There could be no doubt. Roger Whitman! Her heart flipped and skipped and she turned to her husband.

"Phillip," she said. "It's Roger Whitman. I think he's following us."

"Where?"

She pointed and his eyes followed the gesture. "I don't see him."

She looked again. He was gone. Disappeared. Or had he ever actually been there? She couldn't be sure.

"Emilie," Phillip's voice was larded with remonstrance. "You must learn to inhibit your imagination. It betrays you and that can lead only to disaster if allowed to continue unchecked."

She said no more and they continued the rest of the way in awkward silence. It was on the sidewalk in front of the LeRoi Guest House that the short, swarthy man appeared, floating in front of them from out of the shadows, a grin on his ferret face, eyes glittering.

"Well, sir," he spat out. "I figured you'd show up sooner or later."

Phillip fixed him with a stern look. "You have mistaken me for some other. Step aside, please."

"I reckon there's no mistake."

Phillip flushed. "I said step aside and allow my wife and I to proceed."

"I want words with you," the man said thinly. "Last time you was here you lost . . ."

Phillip placed one hand on the man's chest, and pushed hard. He stumbled backwards. "Come around again and I'll really teach you some manners, fellow."

Emilie waited until they were back in their room before speaking, almost afraid to ask the question and equally afraid to remain silent.

"Who was that man, Phillip?"

"How would I know?"

"He seemed to know you."

"He was mistaken."

"He seemed so certain."

Phillip swung around to face her, mouth distorted, eyes hard, blazing. "I said that I did not know him and that should be sufficient for you, for any wife. You will learn to accept your husband's word as final and never to question . . ."

"I'm sorry. I thought . . ."

"That's just it, Emilie. You did not *think*. You seldom do, unfortunately. I expect that from now on you attempt to exercise your mental faculties with more facility. And now I believe it might do us both justice if we prepared for bed and ended this conversation."

She slept very little that night, only inches away from the warm, relaxed body of her handsome husband, but light-years away in time and feeling. Even worse, she felt like a stranger to herself, alienated and remote, and she wondered fitfully what the next day held, what new uncertainties, what fresh disappointments, and if any of her tomorrows would bring tranquility.

The days and nights in New Orleans took on an unreal quality for Emilie, and yet they were real enough, too startling, too dismaying to be anything but real. They went sightseeing, attended concerts, went shopping, and for Emilie, it was all enjoyable and rewarding, yet instead of finding the tensions draining away, instead of finding new peace and gratification in her marriage, she soon discovered that her nerves had gathered together as if in a tight knot behind her navel and she was constantly wary, taut, as if balancing herself on a high, thin

wire, afraid of stumbling helplessly from the great height.

Nothing they did in New Orleans seemed to pass without Emilie provoking Phillip in some way, or embarrassing him. Sometimes an innocent question would draw a professorial lecture that caused her to feel small and inferior, though she realized that Phillip was only trying to elevate her horizons, to help her to better herself; sometimes her clumsiness of hand would draw attention to them, as when she managed somehow to elbow a tumbler of wine onto the floor while lunching at Antoine's. And there were the times she saw that little ferret-faced man who had talked to Phillip in front of the LeRoi Guest House, only to have him disappear before Phillip could locate him, thus drawing increased disbelief and annoyance. There was the incident at Madame Charlotte's, that most fashionable ladies' shop on Canal Street.

Had she thought about it, Emilie should have guessed it would go badly; it was that kind of a day. To begin, she overslept and Phillip was forced to wake her, and that alone created a small unpleasantness. In her anxiousness to please him, to make up for her transgression, she dressed hurriedly and without any proper thought to what she was wearing, or how one item blended with another. The result was that she wore a dress for which Phillip had expressed a clear distaste, pinning to it a garnet brooch.

"How long are you going to be?" he pressed.

"I'm ready now," she said nervously, turning for his approval.

He scanned her swiftly and tiny disapproving ridges appeared between his eyes. "Taste, my dear. Taste. You must try to acquire a modicum of it." He smiled a sad, indulgent smile as he approached her. "I suppose I shall have to be patient with you, dear wife, and with your ineptitudes." He unpinned the brooch. "The garnet clashes with the yellow of the dress you've selected and offends the eye. Please, remember that, Emilie."

She dampened her lips. "I will, Phillip. I'm sorry."

"No need to be sorry, my dear." He brightened perceptibly. "Perhaps I shall compose a list of colors that blend, so that you will not make this sort of error in the future. Or, when we return to Foxhollow, I might designate which of your jewels go with which gowns, and so on. That way there would be no chance of a mistake."

Perhaps that would be best. For clearly Phillip had impeccable taste and acute color perception and was never wrong about such matters. Though she had managed to choose her own clothes through the years, Emilie had never considered herself to be a setter of fashion trends. Actually, she had always felt somewhat uncertain and often sought advice and suggestions from other women. With Phillip's assistance, perhaps there would at last be true harmony in her wardrobe.

Madame Charlotte's shop had the look of exclusiveness about it, the exterior neat and tasteful, the window artfully decorated with plush hangings that obscured the interior and contained a single sketch of an exceedingly simple and expensive evening gown. One glance convinced Emile that this was not the right place for her and she told Phillip so. He snorted disparagingly.

"Nonsense! You are my wife now and you shall have only the best, especially in clothes, Emilie. It is important that you make the proper appearance."

"But the money, Phillip."

He laughed shortly, mirthlessly, and his dark eyes remained flat. "Are you implying I cannot afford to clothe my wife properly, Emilie?"

She read the resentment in his tone and grew defensive. "Oh, Phillip, it isn't that at all. But I do not require expensive clothes. I have never been a girl of lavish tastes . . ."

"Then perhaps it is time you became such a girl. Shall we go inside?"

Madame Charlotte herself greeted them. She was a small woman of indeterminate years with a haughty birdlike quality, more the hawk than the sparrow. She held herself very stiff and straight in a high-necked blouse,

unadorned, except for a tiny gold watch suspended from around her neck on a thin gold chain. When she spoke it was as if through clenched teeth.

"*Bonjour madame, monsieur.* May I help you?"

"My wife," Phillip said graciously, "is interested in purchasing a new gown or two. Something not too formal, yet suitable for entertaining."

"Ah, yes, monsieur. For when receiving at home?"

"Exactly."

"*Bien.*" She clapped her hands sharply and a younger woman appeared, an assistant. "Marie. Bring some examples of the new fashions for monsieur to pass upon." The girl disappeared, to return minutes later with a simple dress of turquoise silk. It looked terribly expensive to Emilie. As the girl displayed each succeeding garment, Madame Charlotte described it as to fabric and style and workmanship. No mention was ever made of money and that bothered Emilie. She was certain that for the price of one of Madame Charlotte's creations she could buy two or three dresses in a less fashionable shop.

"Perhaps madame would like to try on one or two models," Madame Charlotte was saying. "In order that monsieur may properly judge."

"A good idea," Phillip agreed.

The salesgirl, Marie, led Emilie to a dressing room and helped her out of her dress and into another. A moment later she presented herself for Phillip's approval. He eyed her narrowly.

"My dear," he said thinly. "It is essential that we fatten you up upon our return home. There is a boniness about your shoulders . . ." He smiled and turned to Madame Charlotte. "Another please."

Finally the selection was narrowed down to three gowns and Phillip asked Emilie to model each of them again. She did and now he sat silently, lips pursed, considering what he had seen. She waited tensely for him to decide, hoping that her own preference coincided with his own. As if reading her thoughts, he glanced up and spoke.

"Which dress do you like best, Emilie?"

A surge of relief spread through her and a wan smile touched her mouth. "Oh, the green pattern, Phillip. Very much."

He scowled. "I'm afraid not, my dear. It is hardly the sort of thing for the mistress of Foxhollow to wear. Let's eliminate it, Madame Charlotte. Now, Emilie, I want you to try on the pink and the light blue gowns once more."

She returned to the dressing room and changed again. An oppressive heaviness slowed her movements and she wished she were elsewhere. If only Phillip would decide. She went out to where he sat, wearing the pink dress. He was deeply engrossed in conversation with Madame Charlotte, discussing the wretched state of the opera in America. They spoke in a mixture of French and English, and though she understood both languages fluently, to Emilie it seemed like an indecipherable verbal stew. Her brain was clumsy and slow and refused to assimilate what she heard.

"Phillip—" she began once, but an upraised hand silenced her, kept her still and immobilized. A faint trembling began in her knees and worked its way upwards inexorably. After an interminable wait, Phillip glanced at her.

"Now the other gown." He turned back to Madame Charlotte. Marie was not in the dressing room and Emilie struggled out of the dress with awkward fingers. She picked up the blue gown and it felt heavy in her hands, too heavy to endure. It fell to the floor. She kneeled to retrieve it, felt her knees give way, and found herself crouched on the floor, sobbing great wracking, silent sobs. How long she remained in that position she never knew. Nor was she aware when the curtains parted and the salesgirl, Marie, peered in.

"Oh, madame!" she shrieked, went running to the front of the shop. A moment later Phillip was there beside Emilie, his voice urgent in her ear.

"Emilie! What does this mean? Stand up immediately."

He drew her to her feet. "*Now you will stop crying.* Are you hurt?"

"No," she managed haltingly.

"Then there is no reason for this outburst. Have I done something to disturb you?"

"Oh, no, Phillip." She felt guilty that he should even have to consider such a possibility. "It's just me. I don't know what's wrong." Then, swiftly, like a gushing of flooding waters. "Oh, Phillip, please. Take me out of here. Back to the room. Please. I don't want to remain here any more."

"But you wanted to go shopping."

The tears flowed down her cheeks and she sought to turn away from him. She felt frightened, alone, lost, and then his arms went round her, drew her close.

"I think you are right, my dear," he murmured. "We will leave this place at once. This shop and this city. We return to Foxhollow today."

All the tension seemed to be drawn out of her body at those words. Leave New Orleans and its unaccustomed demands on her nervous system, its crowds and strange people, its noise and hustle, its innovations of custom and music and speech; she yearned for the peaceful familiarity of Foxhollow. There, she told herself, everything would be all right.

It had to be.

chapter FIFTEEN

Back at Foxhollow, Emilie threw herself into the work that needed doing with all her considerable energy. The first task she put herself to was the furnishing and decorating of a room for Phillip to use as a study and music chamber. This was to be apart from the studio at his own house in St. Agathe, which he still used for teaching students.

"Oh, please, Phillip," she had begged. "Let me do the music room for you. I want so much to play even a small part in your work."

He laughed at that. "Very well. It will undoubtedly be beneficial for you to have something constructive to do. I leave all in your hands."

She applied herself diligently. She selected the room carefully and she chose the large sitting room at the southernmost point of the house. It was a large chamber with floor to ceiling windows, which made it bright and cheerful, a good place to spend time, to work. It had once been her mother's favorite, but had been used little since her death. She set about converting it for Phillp's use.

First, carpenters were called in to build bookshelves along the broad north wall, and Emilie had them move in the huge rosewood desk from her father's study. The remaining furnishings she chose from among the most masculine items in the house, many of which were beau-

tifully constructed pieces that Mavis had stored in the deep basement. This done, Emilie arranged to have the room freshly painted, and while the work was going on she drove into town to select material for draperies, which she made herself, carefully detailing each tuck and each pleat. At last, the study was ready for Phillip's approval.

It was on a hot Monday morning that she led him excitedly to the door of the new study. She paused, hand on the knob, "Oh, Phillip, I do hope you like what I've done!"

"I'm sure I will, Emilie."

He smiled at her but it seemed to Emilie that his voice lacked conviction and a spasm of uncertainty took hold of her. She wet her mouth and opened the door. He preceded her into the room. She held her breath while he studied the interior, unable to contain herself until he spoke.

"What do you think, Phillip?"

"It's very nice," he said.

She hesitated. The enthusiasm she had hoped to evoke was nowhere to be heard in his voice. Her face tightened up, her mouth tremulous. "Is something wrong, Phillip? Have I made some horrible mistake?"

"Not at all." He turned and kissed her cheek lightly. "You have done very well. I could scarcely have done better myself."

He moved deeper into the room and stood alongside the desk, fingers caressing it lightly. "A beautiful piece of furniture. Working at it will supply me with considerable pleasure." As he spoke, his eyes roamed about the room.

"Tell me," she said intensely. "What is it you don't like?"

"Everything is fine, Emilie." He moved to where the grand piano stood, her father's piano. He opened it and his fingers danced over the ivory and a snatch of some vaguely familiar Bach theme was heard. "A magnificent instrument."

"It was my father's."

"Yes. I know that." He looked up at the draperies.

"Do you like them, Phillip?"

"What? Oh, yes."

"I made them myself."

"I can see that." There was a certain dryness of tone, an implied criticism.

"You don't care for them."

"Did I say that?"

"You needn't say it. I can tell."

He turned to face her, expression stern. "Emilie, you must learn to accept what I say and not read hidden meanings into my words. As for the work you've done here," his hand swung wide to take in the room, "you have done very well." He hesitated and again his eyes raked the walls. "Perhaps you might have consulted me about the color scheme. The paint is, what shall I say—less than perfect."

"But, you've always liked shades of green." There was a kind of desperation in her voice."

"True. But there is a somewhat bilious undertone to this particular green. Still," he shrugged. "It's too late now."

"Oh, no," she said hurriedly. "It isn't too late at all. I'll summon the painters back, have them do it over."

He started out, paused in the doorway. "And the drapes, too." He smiled at her, eyes steady. "A heavier fabric, my dear, something to exclude the light. That's the purpose of draperies, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes, Phillip," she murmured absently, after he had gone. "Yes."

The rest of that morning went swiftly, but Emilie never knew where or how it disappeared, nor what she did with the time. Phillip had gone to his studio in St. Agathe, and Mary was in the kitchen, and Billy Joe was upstairs repairing some shutters that had torn loose. Nevertheless, there was a solitariness to the big house and she kept searching for ways and means of occupying her mind; nothing seemed to work. She had intended sending

Billy Joe into town to inform Mr. Woodward, the painter, that she would require his services once more. It occurred to her that the whole town would soon know of her error, and would find humor in her inability to please her husband. There would be much talk and jokes at her expense and concealed laughter and she knew there was nothing to do but bear it. It was then that she decided to ride into town herself, to allow Billy Joe to continue with his work.

She informed Mary of her intentions, then went out to the stable and hitched the horse to the light wagon. Minutes later she was bouncing between the twin line of oaks toward Drew Creek and the town. She moved along at a good pace, aware of the hot sun beating on her head and back. It was one of those thick summer days that seems to press down on the land as if attempting to squeeze the last drop of moisture from it and the folk who inhabit it.

She urged the horse to a greater effort and saw the gray head come up, heard the snorting acquiescence, felt the sudden lurch of additional power from the willing steed. The heightened sense of movement, of soft air against her cheek, provided a moment of headiness and Emilie called out to the horse, urged her on, flicking her rump with the long whip. The lightweight carriage bounced along and Emilie felt free and full of unaccustomed abandon as she was jostled on the high wood seat, hair streaming off her forehead, face open and joyful. This was fun, this was now, this was only herself and the horse on the road without obligations or responsibilities. She gave herself to the speed and to the moment.

She never heard the crashing from the deep woods to her right, never recognized the sound of a horse galloping through the brush, never heard the hoarse challenging cries of a hunter. Nor did she see the darting red fox until it was too late, until the fleeing vixen scurried out of the woods and across the road in her path.

The gray mare reared and whinnied in panic, sought to escape this unexpected threatening copper flash. She

broke into a full run, eyes wild, nostrils flaring. Emilie was almost dislodged from her perch, but managed somehow to hold onto the reins, tried mightily to slow this hysterical charge. It was no use. It seemed as if her arms would be yanked out of their sockets as they raced along. The right front wheel bounced over a small rock sending the carriage high into the air and in that instant Emilie fully realized the danger of her situation, if she failed to control the terrified horse. Another obstruction, this time a length of branch no bigger around than a small girl's wrist. Emilie felt herself tossed into the air and reaching to clutch the seat, she released the reins. Now she no longer owned even the slightest check over the stampeding mare. She held on tightly, too frightened to scream, or pray, too frightened to do anything but hang on helplessly.

Even as she had failed to see the fox, which caused the horse to bolt, she failed to see the rider coming out of the woods behind her, urging his mount onto the road, whipping it to a full gallop, charging after the careening carriage. Slowly, he closed the gap between them. She finally saw him as he came alongside and then he flashed to a position parallel to the gray mare. She held her breath as his feet lifted out of the stirrups, as his body gathered itself. He jumped, landed squarely atop the gray. Strong hands reached for the bridle, yanked down hard, harder, harder still, until the frightened animal was forced to slow its pace, to come to a walk, finally halt, heaving and snorting. The man slid off the horse, stroked her brow soothingly, murmuring quiet reassurances until he was certain she would hold. Only then did he turn to Emilie.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

Through the swirling fear, through the glazed relief, through the confusion and the dust and the shimmering gether like some loose gelatinous mass, harden and firm heat, she saw him and watched his features come to- into place. It was Roger Whitman.

"You!" she burst out, voice unsteady, accusative. "Let me alone!" She brushed his hand off her arm.

He stepped back and there was a quick, unreadable expression on his face which was soon replaced by the familiar haughty look, then angled smile.

"I'm glad you're not injured," he said quietly.

"You saved me," she husked. "But it was you who was to blame. This is Foxhollow land and you have no place on it."

His laughter was harsh and biting. "You and your horse," he tossed at her. "Both skittish, quick to panic, to rear, and to run. Look around before you flee, Mrs. McQuade, and you may find cause to stay right where you are."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I think you do. You are too quick to run, to hide, to turn away from life and its truths."

She felt her heartbeat slow, her breathing grow more regular. And her hands had ceased trembling. "If you will give me the reins, please."

He bowed ironically, retrieved the lengths of leather and handed them up to her. "Keep a tight check on your horse, Mrs. McQuade, else she might be too much for you."

She assembled enough strength to face him squarely. "Neither the horse nor you are too much for me, Mr. Whitman. And once again I will remind you that you are trespassing when you present yourself uninvited on land belonging to me. I want you off my property, for now and forever."

"Forever! I think not. That is too long a time for even a Navard. Foxhollow is yours for only a short time more, so enjoy it while you can."

"You're mad . . ." Even as she spoke the word she wanted to call it back. Madness was not a quality she saw in Roger Whitman. No, that was a Navard heritage and as he had pointed out, she was a Navard. "Get off Foxhollow, Mr. Whitman and stay off!" The words came

out of her like rising steam and she whipped the mare into motion, clattered noisily down the road toward St. Agathe, eager to place the threat of Roger Whitman behind her, eager to remove herself from the increasing burdens that plagued her. Had she considered the situation, she might have recognized the grim symbolism of the moment: she was fleeing Foxhollow and Roger Whitman remained.

chapter SIXTEEN

A PARTY! Nancy Dunkirk had invited a few friends for Saturday night. William Markham would be there, Emilie knew, and other familiar and friendly faces. Roger Whitman, too? She pushed the thought out of her mind and visualized Nancy's garden, an ideal place for a gathering. It was lush and colorful with cool arbors, a picturesque gazebo and narrow shaded paths twisting among the hedgerows, there would be colored streamers and Japanese lanterns and, knowing Nancy, strolling musicians. Emilie looked forward to the evening for she knew she would be welcome and safe among old friends.

She was seated in front of her dressing-table mirror brushing her hair when she heard Phillip stirring in his own room. An oath broke out of him and then a chair was knocked over. Nervously, she fingered a rope of pearls, a family heirloom, slipped them around her neck. The door to her room burst open and Phillip stood there. She swung around and saw the annoyance etched on his handsome face.

"What did you do with my shirt studs, Emilie? The black pearls?"

She felt herself stiffen and she grew defensive. "I did nothing with them, Phillip. I haven't been in your room in days."

He cocked his head to one side. "I believe you are mistaken. Have you forgotten? You were in my room

on Thursday, Thursday afternoon, to see if all my clothes were in order, were in need of repair or cleaning. Surely you remember, Emilie."

She bit her lip. He was right. "But I didn't see your shirt studs."

He grunted and turned away. "Your memory, my dear. You must make an effort to sharpen it, if you can."

"There is nothing wrong with my memory," she said with an unusual show of defiance. But it was brief and uncertain and as he looked back at her she averted her gaze, reached for something to say, to change the subject.

"Those are beautiful dueling pistols you have in your study, Phillip. I was admiring them. When did you buy them?"

He stared at her for a long time. When he spoke it was softly, insinuatingly. "Those pistols came from New Orleans, Emilie. I bought them in the French Quarter, along with the display case. In that funny little antique shop. Surely, you remember."

She smiled uncertainly. "I suppose I wasn't with you."

"But you were." His expression grew grave, his forehead rutted. "It was you who suggested the display case, a case that would keep the pistols in fine working order and could be locked for safekeeping. You must remember."

Frantically, Emilie searched her brain for some small memory of the incident. Nothing came. She wanted more than anything to recall, to see again the antique shop, to hear the words spoken, but no familiar images floated to view. She arranged her face in a cool expression. "Of course," she said. "I remember very well, Phillip."

He smiled thinly. "Of course you do. Now you'd best get dressed. We don't want to be late for Nancy's party."

Why had she lied? She pressed herself. It was no crime to forget something; many events passed unnoticed by people and no amount of prompting ever brought them back to mind. But she found it impossible to erase the guilt she felt or the emptiness of a mind that was losing

its grip on the past. She tried not to consider the meaning of her faulty memory, what it symptomized and she forced herself to concentrate on dressing for the party.

It was a lovely party. And the sound of laughter and gay conversation floated over Nancy's beautiful garden, mingling with the music of a trio of strolling fiddlers. Emilie sipped sparingly of a glass of pink champagne and stood at Phillip's side and listened to his sparkling conversation. But her occasional efforts to join in, to contribute in some way, to make her presence known, all came to dismal ends; her opinions appeared to displease Phillip and his responses were caustic and biting and her attempts to humor all fell flat.

At last she withdrew, making some small excuse, aware that her departure caused no dismay, in fact, little notice. She made her way deeper into the garden, past small groups of people. She spied William Markham but made no attempt to respond to his smile of greeting. She felt a need for solitude, a chance to regain her composure, to analyze her feelings.

Behind the gazebo, at a turn in the path, she discovered a white iron bench. Emilie sat with relief and tried to clear away the mist that beclouded her brain. She didn't hear the footsteps on the path, nor see the tall man coming toward her until suddenly he was there in front of her, feet planted solidly, staring fixedly.

A gasp of fright trickled out of her and a hand went to her breast. In the darkness she failed to recognize him, until he laughed, that throaty, cutting laugh, so mocking. It was Roger Whitman. She gathered her resources and spoke in a tone of assumed haughtiness.

"I didn't expect to find you here, Mr. Whitman."

He inclined his head. "Yet here I am, Mrs. McQuade, turning up like a bad penny."

"I didn't realize that you were a friend of Mrs. Dunkirk's."

"Not friends, I fear. That would be too strong a word. After all, I am a man who works in the stable, with horses, a necessary service, but hardly one to make me

a social asset. No, I am invited simply because there is a shortage of single, eligible men in St. Agathe and even a stable hand is better than no man at all."

"Nancy Dunkirk is no snob, sir."

"And you?"

"I judge people by their actions alone."

"How democratic of you. I wonder, will you feel similarly when Foxhollow belongs to me and you do not have the prestige of the plantation behind you?"

It was too much. She rose quickly, words choking in her throat, mind racing wildly, blindly, eyes darting. She had to get away, had to conceal herself from the public slights, the loss of memory, the dangers. She fled up the path toward the Dunkirk house.

"Wait!" he cried after her. "There is something you must know . . ."

She went pushing through the guests milling about the lighted portion of the garden. She didn't notice William Markham coming toward her, didn't see Nancy watching her apprehensively, wasn't aware of Phillip heading in her direction. She cast about for some private place, saw no haven, turned to go into the house. Her swinging elbow rammed into the tray laden with filled champagne glasses in the hands of a servant. The blow drove the tray out of his grasp and it went crashing to the ground with the unmistakable sound of breaking glass.

All conversation ceased and all eyes turned toward her. She stood transfixed, frozen into place, stunned by her clumsiness, her inability to function properly in a normal social situation. There was Phillip, lean and hard, frowning, striding forward, eyes flashing his displeasure. She turned and ran.

Outside, she found their carriage and struggled to the driver's seat. A moment later, she was bouncing down the gravel road at a full gallop, away from the party, away from the humiliation, the danger, away from everyone. Except herself.

Later, how much later Emilie never knew, she was seated in front of her dressing table mirror, staring at

her hollow-eyed reflection. She was still dressed as she had been at the party and she wondered how long she had been seated there. The sound of a horse coming up the drive, of reining to a stop at the veranda, drifted up to her. That would be Phillip, she knew. Phillip, angry and accusing, wanting to know why she had acted in such a childishly stupid fashion, and she would be able to find no satisfactory answer.

His footsteps were on the stairs, clicking down the polished hardwood floor of the long corridor, bursting into her room. She saw his reflection in the glass.

"Emilie." His gentleness of tone and quiet manner puzzled and surprised her. She had anticipated an angry outpouring, a burst of recrimination, of cutting sarcasm. Instead, this. "Emilie, are you all right? When you left so hurriedly I assumed you might be ill. I borrowed a horse . . ." There was an apologetic note in his voice as he stood behind her, hands coming to rest on her shoulders, fingers kneading, moving to her pale throat, stroking steadily.

She said his name softly, guilty that she had feared his reaction, for failing to believe in him, for not knowing that he would be kind and understanding. "At the party —your manner—I thought you were displeased with me."

"Was there any cause for me to be so? I think not." He fumbled with the catch of her pearl necklace, unfastened it. "If ever I am abrupt with you, Emilie, it is because I recognize the full potential of you and regret your failure to live up to it." He bent and softly kissed the back of her neck, loosing ever-widening circles of emotion in her. She watched him move away, to where her jewelry box stood, a miniature reproduction of her polished walnut dresser. He opened it and deposited the pearls, started to turn away when something caught his eye.

"What's this!" The quick hardness of his tone chilled her and she stiffened in her chair. She saw his shoulders tense and the veins bulge angrily in his neck. He pivoted around, face livid, mouth a thin red line, hand extended. She leaned forward and it was with horror that she per-

ceived the black pearl studs he had earlier been seeking. Her mouth went dry and a thickness filled her throat.

"You still maintain that you did not see my studs?" he asked icily.

"I—I don't understand, Phillip. I didn't . . ."

He held one hand aloft. "Please, do me the honor of not lying."

"I'm not lying. . . ."

"These do no service to your fidelity, Emilie. The studs were in your jewel box. Why? Why, Emilie? Why did you take them?"

"I didn't."

"Do you think I put them there?"

"No, but . . ."

"But there is no one else, dear wife. You took them yourself for some insidious and misbegotten reason. Have you been so reduced in character as to steal from your own husband?"

"I didn't steal them!" Her voice rose shrilly, desperately.

"Then why did you not confess that you had taken them from my room? What earthly excuse can you offer for such behavior?"

"No," she moaned. "No. No. No! NO! I didn't take the studs. I couldn't have. They are of no value to me, of no concern. I would never do a thing like that. Perhaps you put them there yourself, Phillip. And forgot about them. Yes. Of course. That must be it. You placed them in my jewel box and never thought again about it. You see how simple the explanation is?" Her eyes rolled crazily and her lip trembled and her hands refused to be still. Her voice, unsteady, rose on an undulating slope until it reached the upper limit of her register and she fell silent, sobbing breathlessly, aware of the hollowness of her defense, aware that Phillip did not accept her reasoning, aware that she couldn't believe it herself.

He started back to his own room, turned at the door, aloof and controlled, his swart handsomeness rigid and

accusatory. "You are not in control of your faculties, my dear," he said without expression. "I would suggest that you go to bed, rest. Perhaps in the morning you may be ready to give this matter your rational attention. Remember, Emilie, I am your husband and I love you and want only for us to be happy together." He closed the door behind him.

"Phillip, wait!" But he was gone. She sat sobbing at the mirror for a long time and at last the crying ceased and she stood up and made ready for bed.

Sleep refused to envelop her in its appealing oblivion. Instead, she lay in the huge four-poster, mind ranging far and wide in unconnected imaginings. Her father's aristocratic face drifted into view, a look of disapproval on it and his lips moved.

"The studs, Emilie," he seemed to say. "You should not have taken them. It was the sort of thing your poor mother did before the Navard illness claimed her . . ."

"I didn't . . ." The face faded out of sight to be replaced by Mavis, beautiful, grinning mockingly, laughing over some private horror, some oncoming disaster.

And then the small girl that once was Emilie, standing tensely outside of a large carved door, listening to the screams and the wild laughter and the curses of a woman doomed—her mother.

At last the images drifted away from the screen of her mind and she lay still and rigid in the darkness, waiting. The silence was ponderous, permeating every cavity of her being. At first she wasn't certain she heard. Then it was repeated. A dripping, faint and irregular, now louder and coming more rapidly. She sat up and strained to pierce the darkness. A dripping? No, the ticking of a clock. It couldn't be, lacking that regularity and speed, that timed expiration of the seconds. What then? Her feet hit the floor and she padded toward the bathroom. The water was off, each spigot tightly closed, and still she heard the sound. Where did it come from? It was louder, now, all around her, impossible to locate. Was it

only her imagination, a ticking within the confines of her brain, a non-existent sound, a sound born of despair, of fear, of an unsettled mind?

Oh, no. A scream broke out of her and then another. A light from the distance, coming closer, flickering, casting undulating shadows. She shrank back on her bed.

"What is it, my dear?" It was Phillip. "What's wrong?"

She fought for control. "Listen," she hissed. "Listen to the strange sound, as if a clock, or water—"

Only the sound of her own hoarse breathing could be heard. "There are no sounds," he said gently. "No sounds at all." He eased her under the coverlet as a parent might direct a troubled child, kissed her brow. "Now try and sleep, my darling. You must get your rest."

"But Phillip," she said, voice small, weak. "I *did* hear something."

"Yes," he said indulgently. "Now close your eyes. You'll feel much better in the morning."

He left and the darkness closed in around her again. She struggled to exclude all thoughts from her mind, but couldn't refrain from trying to listen, to hear the sounds, to track them down. There was nothing. Only that deep, dark silence. Perhaps there had been no sound, no sound at all, and it was only a fevered imagination plaguing her, moving her nearer to an inexorable and terrible end. She got no sleep that night.

chapter SEVENTEEN

Time was a question of sleepless nights studded with strange and terrifying sounds, and days of swift shadows flitting through the woods, the figure of a man, watching ominously, observing her every move, waiting. There was no rest, no peace, no safety. One night she prevailed upon Phillip to share her bed, and while he slept she waited for the night sounds to come. But nothing disturbed the silence. Nothing. And so she knew there was no help anywhere.

Two nights later, alone in the four-poster, in the bed that Mavis had slept in, Emilie heard the rhythmic clicking, the inexorable intrusion of disaster. And behind it, as if from afar, came a thin, quavering voice as if out of a gray mist, calling her name, repeating it, directing her.

"Here, Emilie . . . here . . . I . . . am . . . and waiting . . ."

She wanted to run but there was no place to run to. Light from Phillip's room leaked under the door and she forced herself out of bed, through the short corridor, knocking tentatively, pushing the door open, ignoring his surprise, his annoyance.

"Phillip! Please. I can't be alone. Not now. Let me stay here with you for a little while."

He shrugged and made no effort to disguise his feelings. He turned back to the chess board on the table in

front of him. "If you like. But I'm trying to solve a problem and you mustn't disturb me."

"Perhaps," she offered hesitantly. "Perhaps you would play a game with me."

He laughed abruptly. "Why not? But expect no mercy from me. I am an expert and from what I've seen of your mental gymnastics, my dear, you lack the capacities to play well."

He gestured for her to sit across the board as he arranged the elegant carved ivory pieces. She was not a good chess player and hardly expected to win, she simply wanted to keep her mind occupied, to tire herself enough so that she could sleep.

"You begin," he said curtly. "I give you that."

She made her moves hesitantly, trying to plan ahead, but unable to evaluate the board, unable to project beyond the immediate. But then an opening appeared that she could not ignore. She brought her queen onto the board, placing it on the king-knight's fifth square. Phillip raised a quizzical eyebrow at the move.

"You must remember to develop your pawns and lesser pieces before bringing the queen into play." His tone was mocking, and he swept her queen away with his knight. "The queen is no more powerful, my dear wife, than she is vulnerable."

They continued to play until Phillip launched his king's bishop boldly down its diagonal. "Check!" he said triumphantly.

She moved desperately. He laughed softly, moved his knight. "It is over. Checkmate." He was right. She had lost ignominiously. "You had better get back to bed now."

Oh, no. Not yet. "Another game, Phillip. Just one more."

He assessed her objectively. "Very well. One more." He arranged the players and she made the first move. They played silently exchanging pawns twice during the first five minutes of the game. Then, as if it was a move

he had been planning and waiting to make, Phillip shot his bishop full length along the diagonal. Smugly, he stood up, went to the sideboard and poured himself a glass of sherry.

Emilie surveyed the board. Her eyes saw the opening but her brain refused to accept it. Again she looked and again her vision was confirmed. Two clear moves to checkmate and nothing he could do would stop her. She moved her queen into position.

"Check."

He came back to the board, reached casually to protect his king with a knight.

She moved her castle. "Checkmate," she said. "Isn't it, Phillip? I mean, I've won, haven't I?"

Phillip towered over the board, staring, brow gathered unhappily, eyes roaming over the dormant pieces, lines dragging at the corners of his fine mouth. At last he looked up, eyes flat and cold.

"Was that necessary, Emilie?"

She couldn't repress the excitement of her triumph. "Necessary?" She uttered a short laugh. "You didn't think I could win, Phillip, did you? Well, neither did I, I must admit. Let's play another."

"You disappoint me."

There was a quality in his voice that stabbed into her vitals and warned her of the storm to come. She felt a nerve leap in her throat. "I—I don't understand . . ."

"You cheated, Emilie."

"Oh, no. I wouldn't."

"You moved my king's pawn out of position, exposing the king and making it vulnerable. It was a shameful thing to do."

"Oh, no. I didn't."

"A despicable thing to do. Beneath you. I never thought my wife would stoop to such tactics, and over only a game."

"But Phillip," she blustered, confused, frightened, unsure of what had happened. "I didn't cheat."

"I would suggest you return to your room now, madame. There is nothing further for us to discuss. Nothing."

He turned his back and waited until she was gone.

It was imperative that she get out of the house the next day. Phillip had already departed for his studio when she came downstairs to have her morning coffee in the kitchen, refusing Mary's offer of breakfast, unable to entertain even the thought of food.

"Miss Emilie," the maid said worriedly. "You ain't lookin' so well these days. Somethin' botherin' you. Mebbe you should go visit with Dr. Phelps."

"I'm perfectly all right." Emilie's voice was sharp and tight and she was immediately sorry she had snapped at Mary who had only her best concern in mind.

She decided that she had to do something, get out of the house, fix her mind on a subject other than herself and her problems. "Will you have Billy Joe hitch up the buggy for me, Mary. I'm going into St. Agathe to do some shopping, maybe visit with Mrs. Dunkirk."

"Yes'm. It do you good."

It was mid-afternoon when Emilie exited the general store, her order loaded on the back of the carriage, preparatory to riding over to Nancy Dunkirk's. From behind, she heard her name being called and turning, she saw William Markham advancing, hands extended, a wide grin on his weatherbeaten face.

"Emilie, how good to see you. It's been these many weeks. Are you well?"

"It's good to see you, Mr. Markham." She saw the anxious look in his eyes and realized that her lack of sleep, her mounting nervousness, all showed on her face. "You seem to be in fine spirits."

He grunted and made an effort to lighten his manner. "Did you get my letter, Emilie? Consider the offer. It is worth entertaining, for it would allow you to retain the house and a large section of the land."

She was puzzled and said so. "What letter are you referring to?"

"I wrote to you ten days ago, outlining an offer made by Houston and Sons, a large manufacturer of cotton goods, for a section of Foxhollow to the north of the house, on the river. A very substantial offer."

She wet her lips. "I received no letter." She hesitated. "Besides, as you know, I have no intention of selling Foxhollow in whole or in part. Not now, not ever."

"Oh, I thought you had softened your stand, or so I understood Phillip to imply."

None of it made sense to her but she could not assimilate the meaning of it all, and suddenly she wanted to get back to Foxhollow, as if her presence on the land itself might protect it, keep it safe from intruders. She made a hurried excuse and climbed into the carriage, whipping the mare into motion, clattering down the dusty street at a good pace. She saw the horseman swing out of a side street, recognized Roger Whitman, and, as if he personified all the dangers she feared, Emilie lashed out at the horse, urging her on to greater speed.

She was no more than a mile out of St. Agathe when she heard the sound of hoofbeats from behind. A quick look and she saw a horseman coming on fast. Roger Whitman! Terror seized her and she whipped the mare hard. The gentle beast whinnied and reared, broke into a full gallop. A shrill cry broke out of the animal and her head began to swing wildly from side to side and suddenly the light carriage did likewise, as if on the tail end of a whip, snapping about wildly, until Emilie feared she would be thrown to the ground. The light wagon bounced high, sent skyward by a rock, it veered sharply to the right, wheels grinding into the ditch. The mare galloped on without restraint, neighing as if in pain, whipping the carriage wildly. Emilie heard a racking sound, metal grinding, wood snapping, something breaking, axle and the rear right wheel. The carriage lurched and Emilie went to her knees in the space in front of the

seat, clutching desperately to keep from being hurled to the ground, from being seriously injured, or worse. And even in that moment of stress and fear, her one overriding fear was of Phillip's reaction when he discovered that the carriage had been broken.

All at once, Roger Whitman came racing alongside, grabbing at the bridle with one hand, yanking hard, fighting the panic-stricken mare, winning the battle, easing her to a stop. Quickly, he dismounted and soothed the terrified animal. One look told him that Emilie was unhurt, though shaken, and he ignored her while he examined the heaving horse. At last he stepped over to where she still clung to the seat.

"It's over," he said.

"I thought I was going to be killed." She gazed into his face. "That's the second time you've saved my life."

"I might have been the cause of your horse breaking last time, but I am totally innocent on this occasion." He held out his right hand, opened it. She gazed at the twisted object lying in his palm.

"What is that?"

"A barb, from wire fencing. Someone went to the trouble of placing this under your horse's bridle, attaching it under the bit so that when the horse pulled hard the bars would dig into the tender flesh around her mouth, give considerable pain and cause her to bolt."

"Who could have done such a terrible thing?"

"Someone who wanted you injured, perhaps killed. Someone who stood to profit from your death."

She stared at him blankly, a visceral coldness spreading across her middle. "You . . ."

He laughed mirthlessly. "Think again, dear lady."

He stood loose and almost indolent, yet there was an inner tension to him, muscles and nerves stretched tight as if he were readying himself to leap quickly into action, to launch himself against an expected enemy. And in that split moment of eternity, Emilie saw him less as one to be feared than as an ally, and that caused her to feel strange, vaguely traitorous to herself, her past, and to

Phillip, oddly enough. It was as if she anticipated what was to come and sought some means of turning it aside, not hearing, not seeing, not knowing what Roger Whitman was about.

"I have no enemies, Mr. Whitman," she heard herself saying. "None but you, that is."

His expression never changed. "I am no enemy of yours." His voice was soft. "Perhaps my temper is less under control than it might be and so my words are often heated and unjudicious, but I would cause you no injury, whether real or fancied, and on that you can rely."

"But the barb . . ."

"You will not be pleased by what I have to say."

She hesitated. "Say it anyway."

"I saw your husband standing near your carriage while you were in the general store. He did not see me. His hands spent an inordinate amount of time around your horse's head, around his mouth, time enough to secure a barb in place, to . . ."

"No!"

"I think yes, Mrs. McQuade. I think he is trying to kill you."

She gazed at him in horror, backing off, until she felt the carriage behind her. "You are mad," she hissed out.

He shook his head and spread his hands. "I would not say such terrible things were they not true."

"You lie."

"I am not your enemy. Indeed, I may be your best friend."

An emptiness spread through her middle, made her feel weak and sick, and she wanted to cry but didn't dare give in to her emotions in front of Roger. She raised her chin.

"You have sworn to steal Foxhollow away from me, Mr. Whitman, and this latest scheme of yours, this despicable trick, will fail as will everything else you attempt."

She turned to climb back onto the buggy, but his hand on her arm restrained her.

"Please. Listen to me. Give me only a minute." The deep note of sincerity in his voice held her and she waited, saw him fill his lungs with air and suddenly she knew that this was no game for him, no plot, but an honest effort, and that placed the cold finger of doom deep in her vitals. She held herself very still as he began to talk. "Only a few days ago, there was a man in town, a visitor from New Orleans, a gambler, a short dark man with a ferret-like face . . ." A memory of such a man approaching Phillip, speaking to him in front of LeRoi Guest House spun back to her and she shuddered. "This gambler threatened your husband with bodily harm, worse, if he did not make good his gambling debts incurred over a long period on his many visits down-river."

"What has that to do with me?"

"McQuade needs money. Lots of money and the one way he has to get it, and quickly, is by selling Foxhollow."

"Foxhollow is not for sale!"

"It would be if you were not present to prevent such a sale, if you were dead, or—or safely away in some distant institution."

She shivered and hugged herself, only too clearly understanding his meaning, but not wanting to believe it. She barely heard his next words.

"You know about the offer made to purchase Foxhollow by Houston and Sons. They contacted William Markham and he wrote you. Have you studied his letter?"

The letter she had never seen! What had happened to it? The question must have been visible in every uncertain line of her face and Roger read it easily.

"So you never received the letter!" he said knowingly. "But Phillip did, I'll wager."

She thrust the meaning of his words out of her mind, refusing to accept it, refusing to hear any more.

"No!" she burst out. "I will not listen any longer! It is *you* who wants Foxhollow in order to sell it. It is you

who seeks to cause me harm. Phillip is my husband and loves me and wants only me."

"He tried to get the property through my mother, through Mavis, but failed in that effort. I have reason to believe . . ."

"No more!" It tumbled out of her, shrill and rising, an imperative of hysteria in sound. His mouth clamped shut and he went to his horse, mounted, gazed back down to her.

"I've tried to warn you and you won't be warned. You are a stubborn woman, unthinking, and it would serve you right if your fate were no different than Mavis'. I wish you good luck for you will require your full share of it."

She turned as he rode off, trying to exclude him from her mind, to wash away the terrible words he had spoken, to reject all that he had said. Phillip loved her and craved only her, would cause her no harm. No harm at all. She wanted to believe that. Had to believe it. She *did* believe it, and she kept repeating it all the way home.

chapter EIGHTEEN

Brain whirling in torturous confusion, weariness heavy in her limbs, Emilie went straight to her room and fell weakly upon her bed. Dry sobs wracked her body, but no tears would come, nor would the blessed oblivion of sleep claim her. She tried not to think, to keep her frontal lobes blank, inactive. She lay stiffly, concentrating on allowing no disturbing thoughts to intrude and so at first she heard nothing, and when finally the ticking penetrated to her consciousness it was unusually loud and rapid. She sat erect, all senses alert, chewing her lower lip, eyes darting. Gradually, a new sound, the soft insistence of bird's wings brushing the air, the rustle of the Devil's skirts. A shudder went through her and she fought not to scream. She plunged her face against the bed, clutched a pillow over her ears. It did no good. Her head echoed with the sounds and she felt her skull swell to its furthest limits, a throbbing behind her eyes, a dull ache that mounted in intensity, threatened to explode through the roof of her cranium. And then the voice drifted to ear. It was everywhere, soft, breathless almost, the wind in the trees, a feathery pronouncement, a summons—to what?

To madness.

She sat up and listened. Hard. "Emilie," it came from afar, the voice of doom. "Em-i-lieeeeee. . . ."

"No," she mumbled behind her hands, closing her ears to it, her eyes. "No, no, no."

"Em-i-lie . . . I . . . want . . . you . . ."

"No. No."

"I . . . want . . . you . . . come . . . to . . . meeee . . . Em-i-lieeeeeee . . ."

She came off the bed, head swivelling, eyes seeking the speaker. There was no one there. She went to the door. No one was outside. Phillip? Of course. She hurried along the short corridor to his room. It was empty. She returned to her own bedroom.

"Em-i-leeeee . . . your . . . time . . . has . . . come . . . Em-i-lieeee . . ."

"No!"

"The . . . time . . . of . . . the . . . heritage . . . the . . . Navard . . . heritage . . . Em i-leeeee . . ."

"No," she muttered, lips slack, and a succession of unintelligible protests spilling out of her. "No, no, no, no."

"Em-i-lie!"

She refused to listen. She went to her knees on the floor, hands pressed tightly to her ears, rejecting the deadly summons, and how long she remained there she never knew.

"Em-i-lie!"

It was louder this time and different, the tone deeper, the breathiness gone, the distance gone, a more masculine sound, more demanding, imperious. Her head came up.

"Em-i-lie! Come down here at once!"

Phillip! He was calling her. She pushed herself erect, ran unsteadily from the room, down the great staircase. She stumbled and almost fell, caught the balustrade and righted herself.

"Oh, Phillip." She flung herself against him, holding tightly. Slowly, persistently, he disengaged himself, pushed her away.

"Emilie," he said thinly. "You have ruined the best carriage!" There was mingled anger and disgust in his voice. "Can I not trust you out of the house?"

"But Phillip. It was an accident . . ." All at once the terror of the sounds, the voice she had heard, were gone, replaced by another fear, a new uncertainty as she remembered everything Roger Whitman had said that afternoon, remembered the barb that had caused her horse to bolt. An accident? Yes. It had to be. "The horse broke, Phillip, and began to run . . ."

He glared at her. "You are not to drive alone again," he said sternly. "Never. I forbid it."

And in that wild and unclear moment one thought only kept returning to her mind that she must be allowed to drive alone, must have that freedom, must own that right of movement, to the countryside. She felt like a chastised child, restricted, punished, deprived, and hot tears overflowed her eyes.

"Oh, please, Phillip . . ."

His expression seemed to soften, the dark eyes lost that hard, bright glint, the mouth became less grim. His voice was gentle.

"Emilie, this is for your own good. I care too much for you to allow you to do injury to yourself. Of late, you have acted in such strange and irrational ways that to do otherwise would be to abdicate my responsibility as your husband. Believe me, I know best. Even William Markham agrees with me."

"William Markham . . ."

"I felt it my duty to seek his advice and I have told him of the *sounds* you hear at night, your difficulty in sleeping, the repeated imaginings, of people seen, of shadows, and your forgetfulness, Emilie. You seem unable to function in a way consistent with normal behavior. In the light of–of what we all know–it is best to take no chances."

She felt her knees give way and she slumped to the floor, sobbing, body heaving. "Oh, no. No. Please, no."

He lifted her gently to her feet, helped her back up the stairs to her room, to her bed. She closed her eyes and lay back, senses awash, vaguely trying to remember

something, something Roger had said, something someone else had said—ah, William Markham had said it. But what? Oh, yes, there it was, the memory, returning now with elegant deliberateness. The *Letter.*

"Letter?" came Phillip's answer from afar. "But there was no letter such as that, dear Emilie. Now you think no more about it. Rest, my dear. Sleep. It will help bring you back to me as the sweet girl I married . . ."

She tried to voice a protest, to insist that there had been a letter, an offer to purchase Foxhollow, but no sound came out of her and she drifted off into a dull limbo where there was only purple warmth and ease and no concern or fright, no voices, no memories, no letter. . . .

Morning spun into being, a gray offensive light. Emilie felt as if her limbs were strapped to the bed and all movement involved great effort, her eyes ached and there was a thickness in her mouth, a throbbing at the base of her skull. The throbbing became louder. Someone was knocking at the door. She muttered something and the door opened. It was Mary.

"Miss Emilie," she said. "Mr. Phillip, he say he wants y'all to come on downstairs to breakfast with him. And he say *right now.*"

It never occurred to Emilie to refuse. She forced herself up, shrugged into a robe Mary held for her, shuffled down the great staircase. Phillip was at the dining room table.

"Good morning, my dear," he said. "I hope you are in a more rational temper this morning."

"I don't feel well, Phillip," she managed.

"Some food will help. Mary, bring Miss Emilie some eggs, a portion of sausage patties, some home fries, hominy. That will waken you, I'm sure."

The thought of food brought the bile into Emilie's throat. "Just coffee. It's all I want."

Phillip's face went hard. "You heard me, Mary. Fetch Miss Emilie's breakfast." Mary disappeared. "Food is the

fuel of life, Emilie, and a woman who doesn't eat cannot be expected to function properly."

Mary brought her breakfast. Emilie toyed with the eggs and the sausage, managed a few small swallows, despite Phillip's continual urging that she eat more. He stood up, tossed his napkin to the table.

"I've got to get some music out of my study, Emilie. When I return I want to see most of your breakfast eaten."

She tried, but it was no use. She cast about for some way of disposing of the food before he came back. If only Mary were still there, she could have taken the plate away. But there was no one to help.

"*Emilie!*" It was a perfunctory summons, one that by its tone would brook no hesitation, no opposition. She pushed herself erect and forced herself to walk unsteadily into his study. He stood tall and unbending behind his desk, the planes and angles of his face tense and accusatory, eyes flat, sparkling. "Come *here!*"

She made it across the room to where he stood. He pointed and she followed his steady finger, stared at the center drawer of the desk. There was no mistaking the cause of his displeasure. The wood around the lock had been splintered and bruised, as if someone had used a sharp tool to pry open the drawer.

"What does it mean, Phillip?" she asked dully.

"Perhaps you can tell me, Emilie." He reached out and grasped her arm, fingers hard and painful. "Look there!" He swung her around so that she faced his gun case, the one that protected his fine old dueling pistols. The door of the case was ajar and one of the pistols was gone. "The key to my gun case was in the desk drawer, Emilie, *locked* in that drawer, a fact known to only one person beside myself—*you!*"

She recoiled in horror. "Oh, no, Phillip. I didn't. I wouldn't do such a thing. Of what use would a pistol be to me? I don't like guns, I never have. They frighten me."

"And a gun in your hand frightens me even more, Emilie. Now tell me where you've hidden it. I demand to know."

"I don't have it, Phillip. I don't know where it is."

He shook her. "Don't lie to me."

"I'm not lying." She began to cry, great sobs breaking out of her, spasms surging through her body, voice breaking, eyes swimming, lips tremulous as words, disconnected, meaningless, compulsive, poured out of her.

"Control yourself, Emilie. You're acting like a madwoman. Get hold of yourself. You alone knew the whereabouts of that key, Emilie, and you alone had the opportunity to force open the desk, take the key, and remove my gun. Where have you hidden the pistol?"

"I didn't . . ."

"Who else then? Mary, perhaps? Or Billy Joe? I shall summon them, question them, accuse them?"

"Oh, no."

"The pistol, please."

She struggled to calm herself. "I . . . don't . . . have . . . it."

He straightened up, features falling into a tranquil design, voice losing its taut edge, now soft and easy. "Since our marriage, Emilie, you have tested me in a myriad of ways, my love, my loyalty, my concern for you. Perhaps I have failed you, or perhaps no man could have satisfied the strange and disturbing requirements you make of a husband. Your behavior of late has grown more impossible, more dangerous both to yourself and to others. Now this—this thievery—first my studs—and now a dangerous weapon, a weapon designed to kill. Who is it you wish to kill, Emilie? Are you going to shoot *yourself?*"

"Oh, no!"

"Then I can reach only one other conclusion. It is me you wish to see dead, me you wish to kill, me you intend to shoot."

"Phillip! It isn't true! I . . ."

"You leave me no choice. I cannot trust you for surely you will do something terrible and destructive. For your own good, Emilie, I must isolate you, keep you from injuring yourself or anyone else. You are to be confined to your room, locked in, to see no one until you turn over the stolen pistol to me."

"Phillip, I don't have the pistol . . ." It was a despairing wail, an empty protest.

He led, carried, dragged, her up the stairs, ignoring her feeble protests, her deep and pitiful subbings, her whimpers of innocence, her protestations of wifely fealty, pushing her ahead of him down the long corridor and into her bedroom. He held a key in his hand.

"Here you shall stay, dear Emilie, until you confess your sin, return my pistol and return to your senses."

Then the horrible finality of the closing door and the key in the lock. A disturbing memory floated to her mind, a memory of her mother in this room, and never leaving it, victim of her infected blood. Was this to be Emilie's fate as well? A silent protest lodged in her throat and she tortured her brain seeking ways of altering the heritage.

The pistol. Perhaps she had taken it. *Of course!* Who else could have done it? Only she knew where the key had been concealed, only she had the opportunity. Her eyes darted around the room desperately. Where had she hidden it? Once it was returned, Phillip would surely forgive her, release her from this frightening prison, allow her to live a normal and peaceful life. She rushed about frantically. It was not under the pillows, nor beneath the mattress. The wardrobe! No pistol. She searched hurriedly through the drawers of her bureau. It was not in any of them.

Wearily, she turned away. *Come back to your senses.* Those were Phillip's words and they echoed now in ominous hollowness, for she knew with a deadly certainty that this was her real legacy, extra-legal, incontrovertible, inexorable, and hers alone to have. She, Emi-

he, daughter of Pierre and Dorothea, granddaughter of Henri and Millicent, great granddaughter of Louis and Teresa, was at last a true Navard, for like those other female ancestors, she too had lost her senses, had become unbalanced, mad.

Insane.

chapter NINETEEN

Time. Measure of all things, expiring swiftly when joy and pleasure is present, and oh, so slow when pain and distress are at hand. Time, rich and full, or empty and meaningless. Time, for Emilie in her room, was a sea of internal turbulence, of forces battling each other, of questions unanswered, and answers unsatisfying. Time was a blend of present and past, with no beginning or ending for the one or the other, a cacophony of sound without theme, of color without definition, of images without design.

Time was the rustling, the sibilant breath of sound that returned now to torture her, the faint ticking as if to remind her of the passing seconds, each thrusting her closer to an unknown fate, a fate of despair, of denial, of death. She shuddered and buried her face in the soft fluffiness of a pillow and would have cried again but there were no longer tears nor the energy to sob. Fear was the pervading emotion, fear and resignation, for escape from the inevitable was unthinkable and her just due was retribution. Punishment. Evil was alive in her blood and had to be boiled out, expurgated, drained away. Her spirit must be cleansed of poison, revivified, and only then could she hope to be reclaimed, returned to human society. A vagrant thought, one which she knew would never come into being for she was a Navard and cursed forever in time.

The rustling was louder, close at hand, and the ticking was intensified. It transmuted itself into a deeper sound, more masculine, a resonant knocking. It persisted and she fought to close it out. No use. A voice calling her name as it from beyond the door. She meant not to hear. If only she could remember where she had concealed Phillip's pistol, she thought irrationally, then all of it would be over and she would find release, a kind of peace. Quiet. But her mind refused to remember and the knocking continued, the voice growing more insistent, though hushed, as if trying to conceal its presence from ears other than her own.

Now a clicking. Metal upon metal. A searching, a reaching as if in the dark. Click. Click. Click. Without rhythm, no tempo, uncertain probings in an unknown place. She sat up. The clicking was from the door. She came to her feet, a new terror upon her and she stared wide-eyed at the great carved portal, waiting. But for what? There was no salvation, no hope, no help.

The clicking still, again, again, and now with a kind of finality. It stopped. She gasped, knowing that at last she would face the unknown, the terror that had plagued her, the questions answered, and she wanted to run and hide but there was no hiding place, no safe harbor anywhere. The door swung open and she opened her mouth to scream but no sound came across those parched lips.

He stood there. Ominous, so large and powerful, clothes dark and face pale, blurred. Blank. It was the terrible repeated dream come to life. Her head rocked from side to side and her brain seemed to melt into slow convoluted streams of gray. She started to fall. Hands gripped her, hauled her erect, shook her insistently, but gently.

"There is no time for such indulgence. Listen to me. You must hear me."

Reluctantly the haze lifted and her senses came into focus. Strength flowed back into her limbs and she raised her eyes. His features shifted and assorted themselves into a recognizable pattern. It was Roger Whitman.

"Are you all right?"

"I-I think so," she said. "What are you doing here? You must go. Phillip will be angry if he returns and finds you."

"I watched him leave, else I would not have chanced coming this way. Why are you locked in your room?"

"Phillip. The madness is upon me. I have done strange things . . ."

"I doubt that, indeed, I do. It is not you, but your husband who acts in a manner strange and suspicious and at last I have been able to establish what I suspected all along."

"I don't understand." There was a lightness to her skull, a wisp of cloud swirling about. She wanted to order Roger to leave, but at the same time some minor sense of survival saw him as the only possible release from the terrifying and confusing situation in which she found herself. The world was foreign and threatening, distant, and unaware of her needs, while he was here. Why Roger Whitman? He had been her eneny, sworn to cause her injury and worse, yet he was present and she had to accept his help, for surely there would be no other.

"About Phillip . . ." he began, and she felt the guilt rise in her. Phillip was her husband and wise and good and handsome, right in all things. To listen to this man, this stranger, this Roger Whitman, talk critically of him would be blasphemous, traitorous. She couldn't do it.

"I don't want to hear anything you have to say. You must leave me alone. Phillip will be back. He is my husband."

"Yes," he said, standing close, voice low and insistent. "Your husband, and, before you, the husband to other women."

"No!"

"I have been trying for some time to remember, to place Phillip McQuade, but though the face was familiar, the name held me from the truth. It was in Chicago, where I lived for a while. The story was in all the newspapers. His name then was Thomas Miller. And he

was the husband of Mildred Miller, a wealthy lady some years his senior who died suddenly, violently, having fallen down a flight of steps, ostensibly while under the influence of alcohol. But Mrs. Miller's friends claimed that she didn't drink, loathed the taste of alcohol in any form. Thomas Miller, her husband, was suspected of the murder . . ."

"Murder!"

"Yes, foul and venal, with the lady's fortune as its object. But the case never came to trial for the evidence was skimpy and Thomas Miller disappeared. There is no doubt in my mind that he and Phillip McQuade are one and the same man."

"I don't believe you!"

"But you must," he said quietly. "And there is more. My investigations have revealed that Miller moved to San Francisco where he changed his name to Andre Malcolm and led a high and fancy life, soon going through all of his ex-wife's money. But that troubled him little. He simply married again. This time another elderly lady named McIvers. Shortly after returning from their honeymoon in Hawaii, Mrs. Malcolm was discovered drowned in her bathtub. Her husband claimed to be out of the house at the time, though he was unable to substantiate his whereabouts. The police questioned him at length and finally released him, again for insufficient evidence. Again, his likeness was published in the city's press."

"But Phillip has never been to Chicago or San Francisco. He lived in Paris for many years, studied there."

"No. Never. Never has he been to Paris."

"You're lying to me, Roger Whitman. This is just another scheme of yours, insidious and circuitous, to help you get possession of Foxhollow."

He shook his head slightly, more in sympathy than denial. "Did he confess his knowledge of the letter Mr. Markham spoke of?" He watched as her face seemed to melt. "I thought not. No, it is not I who seeks to get Foxhollow, not now. You see, I realize that I have no legal claim to the property, that the wish was father to

the thought in my case. True, I *wanted* Foxhollow, but I have no *right* to it. None at all. That might be enough to stop me, but not McQuade, or whatever his name may really be."

"Then why are you here? Why do you make these fantastic accusations against my husband?"

He took a deep breath. "I shall mince no more words. Phillip wanted Foxhollow so badly, knowing its cash worth on the open market, that he murdered my mother to get it."

"Murdered Mavis! But her death was an accident."

"Listen closely to what I'm saying. It is all over St. Agathe—that your behavior of late has been strange, and growing stranger. That you are given to nightmares, to uncontrollable bouts of crying, of forgetfullness, of hallucinations. It is your husband who has been propagating such talk, establishing a firm case for having you adjudged insane and getting you committed.

"Oh, no. Phillip wouldn't do that to me."

"With you legally insane, and out of the way, he would control Foxhollow legally and could sell it. That was why he had to murder my mother, for she wouldn't go along with his scheme by marrying him and so she had to be eliminated. He knew that her death would bring you back here and it was his intention to woo you and wed you and ultimately drive you mad."

"But the Navard Curse . . ."

"Nonsense! Some of your ancestors have been eccentric, true, but I've studied the history of the Navards and the stories of madness are often exaggerated. In any case, you are as sane as any woman I've ever met. Delicate and sensitive, yes, emotional and susceptible to suggestion, yes, but not mad. But Phillip knew that he could in time make you lose faith in your own senses, make you believe that you were indeed victim of a family deficiency. It was all part of his scheme."

Emilie reached back, slowly, reluctantly, into her memory, into the days and weeks and months since her marriage to Phillip, remembering all that had passed be-

tween them. his constant sharpness, his prying and probing, the pressures he put on her, the criticisms. At Gahtoire's—had she indeed misordered or was it simply a plot he had worked out with the waiter? And the man who frightened her in the street? And the scene in the dress shop? And all the other incidents that had shaken and disturbed her since? Had all of them been the result of a deliberate campaign to unsettle her, to cause her to question her own sanity? The chess game—she hadn't cheated. She *hadn't*. And she hadn't taken his studs. Nor had she broken into his desk, stolen the pistol. She was sure of that.

The *pistol*. She turned to Roger Whitman. "One of his dueling pistols—he said he bought them in New Orleans with me present, but I don't remember."

"Then you weren't present," Roger said calmly. "Just another device to trouble you, to shake your already unsteady confidence."

"One of the pistols was missing from its case and Phillip accused me of stealing it, of wanting to kill myself with it, or him."

"But you didn't take it?"

"No."

Roger's eyes travelled around the room. "I would wager that sooner or later he would find the pistol, and here, in this room, where you *might* have secreted it."

"But I searched everywhere for it. Perhaps I did take it."

Roger was pacing the room, peering into corners. His head came up and he stared at the huge wardrobe. "Did you search there?" He pointed.

"I went all through the wardrobe."

"And what about above it. I see boxes on top."

"Hatboxes and . . ."

He moved a chair into position, stood on it, reached, feeling about. He moved a green velvet box to one side, exhumed, withdrew his hand. "Look!" he cried triumphantly. Phillip's dueling pistol was clutched tightly in his hand.

"How did it get . . ."

"Get there? Phillip hid it there where you would be unlikely to look, where he could unearth it at a propitious moment. Another bit of contrived evidence in his case to have you committed. What a fiendish scheme, but so effective, with everyone knowing about the madness that has appeared in your family from time to time."

"But—there were other things. For some time I've seen mysterious shadows around Foxhollow, as if someone was there, but no one ever was."

He laughed shortly. "But there was. It was me. This place has drawn me like a magnet does iron filings and I could not keep away. I saw you when you detected me, but to talk to you, to reveal myself, would have meant having you ban me openly from the property, perhaps even bring trespassing charges against me, and I decided not to risk it. It was no ghost you saw, but only a poor man without property or home, anxious to enjoy the traditional beauty of your ancestors."

It remained difficult for her to accept all the information that Roger revealed. She had lived with the thought of the Navard Curse for so long that to disown it now was almost traitorous, especially since believing meant to replace it with a truth that was as bad, worse, a truth that would subvert the meaning of her marriage, of her love, of her faith in Phillip.

"There are other matters . . . the nightmares."

"You are a sensitive woman, a woman of imagination. It is natural that you should dream for they were the expressions of the fears implanted by Phillip McQuade. He knew you better than you knew yourself and used your strengths against you."

"And the voices and the sounds . . ."

A ridge appeared between his pale eyes. "Tell me more about these voices and sounds."

She recounted what she knew, from the beginning, and he listened in silence, the frown growing more pronounced. "I don't understand," he said, when she fell silent. "It doesn't seem right to me. Tell me again about

what you heard, describe the sounds to me, the quality of the voice."

It was difficult but she tried. "There was a remoteness, a distance, as if a wall stood between the source of it all and myself. There was an emptiness, the echo of death, of doom . . ."

His face lit up. "Say that again," he said excitedly.

"What?"

"About the emptiness, the echo of . . ."

"An emptiness the echo of . . ."

"Yes, yes. That's it. Echo. Was there an echo to all of it?"

"I suppose there was."

"An echo. A remoteness, you said, as if a wall stood between the source of the sound and you." He began to pace again, a tense, nervous striding about.

"What is it, Roger?"

He whirled about. "How old is this house?"

"About three-hundred years, I think."

Three hundred years. Yes, that would be about right, if I remember my history. And it fits in with what I knew about McQuade Musicam, Phillip McQuade, the man of sound, of acoustics. It all dovetails so neatly . . ."

"What are you saying?"

He began tapping at the inside wall, the wall adjoining the corridor, ignoring her questions. Suddenly he moved to the wall nearest to Phillip's room. Now even Emilie could hear the different response to his tapping. The wall was hollow. He flung open the doors to her wardrobe, pushed the clothes aside, continued his explorations. Again the hollowness. He ran his fingers over the smooth wood panelling.

"Emilie. Think hard now. Did your father ever tell you any stories about secret passages in the house. These old houses go way back in time and their owners often constructed such passageways as safety measures, from Indian attack for example."

She plagued her memory, remembered. "Yes, there was such a passageway. It was during the days when

the Cherokee tribe was on the warpath, a place to conceal the women and children."

Roger tapped harder on the rear wall of the wardrobe. "I think this, then, must be that passage, probably leading out of the house to somewhere below the garden, I would suspect."

He ran his hands over the panelling. A soft click and the wall seemed to move. Roger moved hard and a shadowed aperture appeared.

"I've found it." A moment later, he was gone, absorbed by that forbidding rectangle of darkness. A tight fear gripped Emilie and in that moment she knew, knew with a rare and steady certainty. Phillip McQuade intended to murder her, or drive her mad, to steal Foxhollow by any means possible. She waited breathlessly.

"Roger," she called softly, then more loudly. No answer. Her nervousness increased. "Roger!"

Still no response. The entrance to the secret passage yawned like an opening into hell and she found herself drawn toward it. Her heart thumped irregularly in her chest and there was a choking thickness in her throat. In the distance, a sound. What was it? A shuffling footstep, perhaps. Another. And another. Footsteps coming closer, moving with greater assurance. Heavy. It could only be Phillip coming after her now, ready to destroy her completely and so end this grotesque plot. And Roger? Surely Phillip had lain waiting in the grisly depths of that passage and had struck him down with deadly efficiency.

Roger dead. It was a heart-rending thought and there was no time to analyze her reactions for the footsteps moved closer and now were upon her. Gasping for breath, she backed off, felt the trembling in her knees, certain she was about to die. Her eyes tracked over the room and she saw Phillip's dueling pistol, reached for it. How heavy it was in her small hand and difficult to cock. Her heart fell and all hope went out of her. It was unloaded.

Through the fear and the anticipation, one thought

kept circling back—how typical of Phillip to make certain the pistol was useless. He took no chances on anything unforeseen happening. Yet she had assumed that Phillip had intended for her to eventually find the pistol and, in her distraught condition, to use it on herself. Why then no deadly ball? Her confusion mounted as she turned to the passageway and the oncoming footsteps, determined to sell herself as dearly as possible, clutching the pistol as she might a club.

She knew she was going to die.

chapter TWENTY

THE FOOTSTEPS.

Heavy and threatening. Her senses reeled and she felt herself sway and the pistol pressed heavily in her hand. She fought hard not to faint, to stand against the danger, to fight against it, not to permit herself to succumb without a fierce struggle. She was a Navard, she reminded herself, and that meant to live and die with pride and courage, as befitted the long line of those who preceded her, the handsome, bearded men and the lovely women whose portraits lined the walls of the great reception hall. The faintness withdrew and even as it did a form suddenly appeared in the opening of the secret passage. She raised the pistol high, ready to strike.

It was Roger and he looked up at her in surprise and a pleased laugh came out of him, full and resonant. "So you were ready to fight, were you? Well, that's a thing I approve of heartily. It's a good sign and about time, too. You've been put upon sufficiently, I would say." He stepped back into the bedroom and stretched, a grin slicing across his begrimed face. He gestured toward the secret passage. "Rather cramped in there and not at all clean." He took the pistol from Emilie's hand and tossed int onto her bed. "Tell me, Emilie—" That grin again. "I may call you Emilie, I hope?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Were any repairs made in the adjoining room recently, any carpentry, I mean?"

Her eyes widened. "Yes. Phillip had certain changes made for himself. Some bookshelves and a new wardrobe and . . ."

"And a door leading into this passageway, a door concealed as this one is by a wardrobe. Obviously, he wanted an access to the passage that no one knew about."

"That must be the reason why he insisted we keep separate bedrooms."

"Of course! He could come and go as he liked and there would be no one to question his activities. And when you heard your *sounds*, your *voices*, both of which he manufactured, he would have time to return to his quarters before you could reach them and find him gone. Also, if he left the house, it was a simple matter for him to return unobserved and continue plaguing you . . ."

"I find it so difficult to believe all of this."

"Believe it, Emilie. Please do, for it is so." He reached for her hand. "Come. Let me show you where your sounds came from. Do you have a candle?"

He held the flickering light high and led the way through the narrow entrance into the passage. After a few steps, Roger stopped and lifted the candle to the full extension of his arm.

"Look here, Emilie."

She squinted into the dimness above and saw that the wall had been planed down so that only a thin veneer separated the passage from what was on the other side.

"I don't understand," she said.

"It's very simple. Your bedroom is beyond this wall and Phillip shaved the partition so that all sound would carry through it clearly, yet not so clearly as if there were no obstruction at all. Someone calling your name from this very place, Emilie, saying it softly, would make it sound like someone summoning you from a distance. But Phillip was much too shrewd to leave it at that. Look here!" He reached down and lifted an object off the passageway floor. A large megaphone. "See Emilie! This amplified the sound, provided that full, ghostly

echo that so disturbed you, that made it impossible to identify Phillip's voice."

The old familiar weakness was upon her at that moment, the ill-making sensations in her middle, the faint trembling of her knees, the spreading anxiety. But now there was a difference, a difference born of resentment, and anger that she should be so betrayed, so tormented, so used by another person as if she were not entitled to live in peace. Still, that uncertainty, that desire not to recognize the cruel truth, that desire to see only the good and the kind . . .

"But perhaps it was not Phillip who did this," she murmured. "Someone else . . . some stranger . . ."

"There must be a *reason* for a person to do such a thing, Emilie. And Phillip had the reason, his lust for money, and he had the opportunity. Besides, there is more, and this will convince you finally, I am certain."

He turned and moved past the narrow descending stairs that led down to the garden until they reached the rear wall of the house. In the traditional way, it was thick, designed to withstand the elements and all enemies. A full six inch space separated the inner and outer walls.

"Your bed stands against this wall, Emilie," Roger pointed out. "So your head is close to it when you sleep."

"Yes?"

"And see this!"

A small shelf had been constructed at eye-level, and running from it, into the space between the walls was a length of tubing made of very thin, pliable wood.

"A kind of elongated megaphone, you might say," Roger explained. "Sufficient to direct a small ticking sound and give it sufficient amplification so as to be heard in your bedroom. See this, Emilie." He lifted a small, triangular device from the shelf, held it out for her inspection—a metronome! And there was a second metronome on the shelf.

"Are these what I heard?" she said incredulously.

He nodded. "See this!" Above the metronomes, a thick

cluster of straw was bound and hanging from a string attached to the wall. Roger set the metronome on the shelf in motion and its arm brushed against the straw.

"The ticking!" she murmured.

"And the rustling, the mysterious rustling." He stopped the metronome. "A clever scheme and so simple. And right in keeping with Phillip's musical leanings. All he had to do was set the timing mechanisms on the metronomes and they did the rest. First one, ticking only. Then the other, rustling the straw. And Phillip himself occasionally supplying the voices. He knew that your vivid imagination would do the rest."

She shuddered as the realization that she had almost succumbed to this awful strategy drifted to mind. She felt cold and wanted to be out of this dank, dark place.

"Please, Roger, let's go back to my room. This passageway makes my skin . . ."

"I understand." Still holding the metronome, he led her back to the opening, through the wardrobe and into the room. He placed the metronome on her night table and carefully closed the opening, turned to face her. "You must consider a course of action, Emilie."

Her mind went blank. "What do you mean?"

"It will be impossible for you to go on as before. Something must be done, now that you know what Phillip was trying to do."

She wet her lips and the old defeatism returned. "What can I do? He is my husband."

"True, but wifely loyalty cannot countenance what he was trying to do. We must go to the sheriff . . ."

From downstairs, they heard the distinct sound of the front door opening, slamming shut. Footsteps, determined, masculine steps, were mounting the grand staircase, coming this way.

"Phillip!" Emilie gasped. She looked about desperately. "You must hide. Quickly. Before he comes here and finds you. There is no telling what he might do. Oh, please, Roger. He will hurt you and I couldn't bear that." And in that tense moment, in that moment of fear and

growing panic, the realization was born that she was worried about the welfare of this man, this virtual stranger, this man she had thought to be her enemy, but who alone had been concerned with her welfare; she gazed at him in the new light. But there was no time for that. "The passageway," she husked.

"No, Emilie. There will be no more hiding. Let Phillip come and find me here. Let him know that his scheme has been found out, that this dangerous game is ended."

"But he will hurt you, or worse."

Roger gazed at her even as Phillip's footsteps came down the long corridor. "There is always that risk for people who would live fully."

She heard his words but they made only a slight impact. "Oh, please, Roger. Please . . ."

And then it was too late.

chapter TWENTY-ONE

He stood there in the doorway, rangy, broad, feet planted firmly and every inch of him threatening. His eyes went from Emilie to Roger and back again and a slow, secret smile sliced across his mouth, a thin expression of some strange satisfaction gained, of some advantage discovered. He took three steps into the room.

"This is not a pretty sight for a husband to come home to, his wife entertaining another man. It provides a husband with cause to act in any fashion he sees fit."

"You need no excuses for any action of yours, McQuade," Roger said quietly.

"Please, Phillip," Emilie said anxiously. "Roger was just going. We were talking . . ."

The grin widened mirthlessly. His brows rose in exaggerated fashion. "Are you two such good friends, then? It will come as a surprise to everyone in these parts, to William Markham, for example, to all who know of the threats you've levelled, Whitman, of your hungering to steal Foxhollow from my poor, weak-minded wife. Have you struck upon another method of gaining your ambition?"

"You sir," Roger bit off, "are filth."

Phillip laughed curtly. "I am a jealous husband, Whitman, a man returning home to find himself victimized. I am out of my mind with rage and jealousy, not at all responsible for my actions." His eyes ranged over the

room, from the wardrobe, doors still ajar, contents pushed aside, to the dueling pistol on the bed, to the metronome. A thin sibilance trickled across his lips. "How busy you both have been! Is there anything you've failed to find out? Any questions that remain unanswered?"

"Oh, Phillip," Emilie said weakly. "How could you treat me this way? I believed in you, loved you, became your wife."

He drew himself to his full height, towering above her, broad and menacing, swart face darker than ever, eyes withdrawn, brooding.

"What a little fool you are! Do you think for a moment that I could be satisfied with such a bloodless creature as yourself around constantly? You were in my way, standing between me and the fortune that will be mine with the sale of Foxhollow. I shall be rich and finally free of all encumbrances."

"No!" she burst out defiantly. "The land will never be sold."

"You won't be around to know. You and Mr. Whitman shall both die, here and now."

"I think not," Roger said.

The corners of Phillip's mouth flattened, twitched and his eyes became hooded. His hand moved and suddenly a long gleaming blade appeared, extended toward them, circling like a wary snake.

"Then think once more."

"Your record is against you, those women you killed before. You cannot hope to get away with it again. That's why you hesitated about murdering Emine before and why you'll not kill now."

"There is one difference. No one will ever know that you two are dead, for I shall bury your bodies deep in that secret passage and neither of you will be heard from again. A note from Emilie, a note I will be able to forge with no difficulty, will state that you two have fallen in love, but aware that the relationship is doomed, have entered into a death pact, have given yourselves to the

river. If you cannot live together, then you will die together. How utterly romantic!"

"It won't work," Roger said quickly.

The knife came up, aimed directly at Roger. "And why not?"

Roger reached out with one arm and pushed Emilie to a position behind him. "Because I will stop you."

Phillip crouched, the blade circling again, shuffling forward. "Then do so, Mr. Whitman, for you are about to be skewered for the offensive pig you are."

Roger backed off, crouching also, hands extended, eyes fastened to Phillip's eyes, seeking that momentary advantage that might be his if he could recognize the instant of decision, the precise second that Phillip decided to launch his attack.

"Stay out of the way, Emilie," he intoned, not looking at her. "Against the wall."

"How chivalrous you are, Whitman. But it matters little. Once I have let your life's blood I shall turn my attentions to the lady. She shall go quickly, that much I promise."

The eyes! A glint, the merest narrowing of the pupils, a flicker. Phillip came on, blade swinging in a cutting arc from beneath his waist, aiming for Roger's middle. He gasped and danced to one side, hands reaching. The thrust missed its target, but Roger felt the sharp edge slice through his jacket sleeve, through his shirt, felt the sting on his forearm, the warm flow of blood.

Emilie screamed and fell back against the wall, hand to her mouth, horrified by the macabre charade. There was a look of triumph on Phillip's face now, a wild expression she had never before recognized, a lust for blood and for death that she realized suddenly had always been present, thinly veiled behind the sleek, handsome veneer.

"A mere scratch, Whitman," he muttered, moving in. "And now the game is over and my sharp little friend here shall end your waiting. Here . . ."

He drove forward, body low, arm held tight to his side. The knife swung wide, seemed to veer, change directions, swoop into the heart of Roger like a river gull diving for its food, determined to satisfy its appetite.

Emilie turned her head and didn't see Roger's swift right arm raise high, chop down, land forcefully on Phillip's stiffened wrist. She did hear the knife clatter to the floor, turned in time to see Roger kick at it, send the blade spinning across the room, out of sight under the bed.

"Now, McQuade," he breathed. "Matters are somewhat more equitable."

A muffled snarl seeped through Phillip's clenched teeth. He charged, fists swinging wildly. One blow drove Roger against the corner of the wardrobe and a sharp pain knifed through him. It hurt to breathe and he wondered if his ribs had been broken. But there was no time for further thought, as Phillip drove another blow to his unprotected face. He ducked and moved aside, hit back. Phillip grunted and landed another blow. Roger saw the opening, the exposed side of Phillip's face. He struck quickly, with authority, and Phillip went down to his knees, scrambling. He came up and dashed past Roger to the bed, turned around, his face triumphant, the dueling pistol tight in his hand. He moved forward, swung hard. Roger avoided the first blow, but not the next, catching it on the shoulder of his wounded left arm, the pain excruciating. He went to the floor, rolled to avoid Phillip's booted kick, came up charging. He hit Phillip at his waist, driving him backwards, the pistol skittering loose. All at once Roger was straddling the music teacher, his fist rising and falling, until Phillip lay still.

After a moment, Roger stood up. He took a long appraising look at Phillip's unconscious form, before turning to Emilie.

"Are you all right?" he said, fighting for breath.

"You're hurt," she managed. "You've been cut." She went to her dresser and withdrew a length of white silk and folded it into a bandage.

"It will be ruined," he protested.

She ignored him and helped him remove his coat, rolled up his shirt sleeve. Blood seeped slowly from the wound and she bound it, tight enough to staunch the flow of blood, but not so tightly as to cause discomfort.

"Thank you," he said.

"It is I who should be thanking you. You've saved everything for me, Foxhollow, my life, my sanity." She glanced down at Phillip's still figure. "What will happen now?"

Roger pursed his lips as he studied her. "First, I shall take McQuade to St. Agathe, turn him over to the sheriff. There will be a trial. I shall also submit my arm to the good doctor's attention. I expect there will be many questions and considerable talking, but eventually it will all be worked out and I shall be able to pursue my desires."

"And what will you do?" Emilie asked softly.

There was a softness in his pale blue eyes, a wistfulness of expression, a warmth of tone. "I should like very much to return here, Emilie, to Foxhollow, to visit you, to get to know you, and to allow you to know me. Perhaps . . ." He paused. "Perhaps you will make me welcome . . ." He let it hang.

There was a small, enigmatic smile on her fine mouth. "Perhaps," she said softly. "We shall see."

Neither of them doubted what her decision would be. Not for a moment.

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